

BREACHING THE  
MARIANAS:  
THE BATTLE  
FOR SAIPAN

MARINES IN  
WORLD WAR II  
COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

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# Breaching the Marianas: The Battle for Saipan

by Captain John C. Chapin, USMCR (Ret)

**I**t was to be a brutal day. At first light on 15 June 1944, the Navy fire support ships of the task force lying off

Saipan Island increased their previous days' preparatory fires involving all calibers of weapons. At 0542, Vice Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner ordered, "Land the landing force." Around 0700, the landing ships, tank (LSTs) moved to within approximately 1,250 yards behind the line of departure. Troops in the LSTs began debarking from them in landing vehicles, tracked (LVTs). Control vessels containing Navy and Marine personnel with their radio gear took their positions displaying flags indicating which beach approaches they controlled.

Admiral Turner delayed H-hour from 0830 to 0840 to give the "boat waves" additional time to get into position. Then the first wave headed full speed toward the beaches. The Japanese waited patiently, ready to make the assault units pay a heavy price.

The first assault wave contained armored amphibian tractors (LVT[A)s) with their 75mm guns firing rapidly. They were accompanied by light gunboats firing 4.5-inch rockets, 20mm guns, and 40mm

guns. The LVTs could negotiate the reef, but the rest could not and were forced to turn back until a passageway through the reef could be discovered.

Earlier, at 0600, further north, a feint landing was conducted off Tanapag harbor by part of the 2d Marines in conjunction with the 1st Battalion, 29th Marines, and the 24th Marines. The Japanese were not really fooled and did not rush reinforcements to that area, but it did tie up at least one enemy regiment.

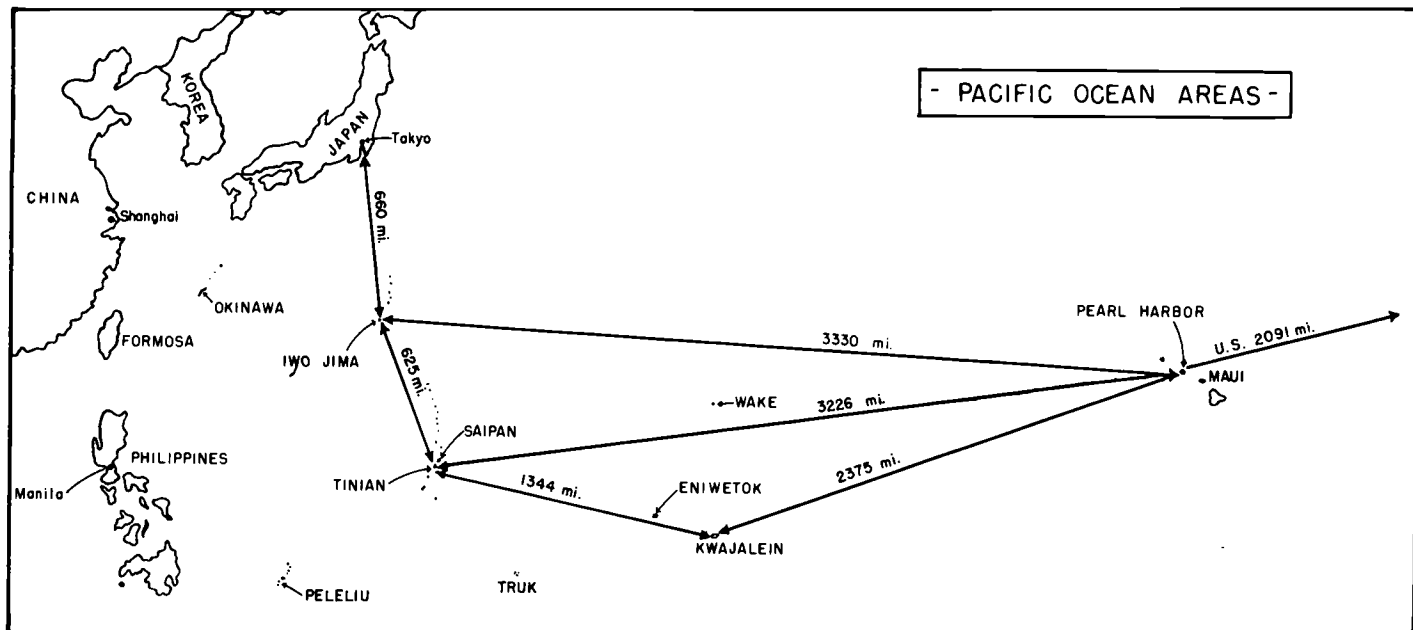
When the LVT(A)s and troop-carrying LVTs reached the reef, it seemed to explode. In every direction and in the water beyond on the way to the beaches, great geysers of water rose with artillery and mortar shells exploding. Small-arms fire, rifles, and machine guns joined the mounting crescendo. The LVTs ground ashore.

Confusion on the beaches, particularly in the 2d Marine Division area, was compounded by the strength of a northerly current flow which caused the assault battalions of the 6th and 8th Marines to land about 400 yards too far north. This caused a gap to widen between the 2d and 4th Marine Divisions. As Colonel Robert E. Hogaboom, the operations officer of the Expeditionary Troops commented: "The opposition consisted primarily of artillery and mortar fire from weapons placed in well-deployed positions and previously registered to cover the beach areas, as well as fire from small arms, automatic weapons, and anti-boat guns sited to cover the approaches to and the immediate landing beaches."

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**On the Cover:** *A Marine enters the outskirts of Garapan, Saipan, through the torii gate of a Shinto Shrine. Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 92993*

**At left:** *The first assault wave has hit the beach from the LVT (amphibious tractor) that brought it ashore, and the Marines now prepare to fight their way inland. Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 83261*



As a result, five of the 2d Marine Division assault unit commanders were soon wounded in the two battalions of the 6th Marines (on the far left), and in the two battalions of the 8th Marines. With Afetan Point in the middle spitting deadly enfilade fire to the left and to the right, the next units across the gap were two battalions of the 23d Marines and, finally, on the far right, two battalions of the 25th Marines.

Although the original plan had been for the assault troops to ride their LVTs all the way to the O-1

(first objective) line, the deluge of Japanese fire and natural obstacles prevented this. A few units in the center of the 4th Division made it, but fierce enemy resistance pinned down the right and left flanks. The two divisions were unable to make direct contact.

A first lieutenant in the 3d Battalion, 24th Marines, John C. Chapin, later remembered vividly the extraordinary scene on the beach when he came ashore on D-Day:

All around us was the chaotic debris of bitter combat: Jap and Marine bodies lying in

mangled and grotesque positions; blasted and burnt-out pillboxes; the burning wrecks of LVTs that had been knocked out by Jap high velocity fire; the acrid smell of high explosives; the shattered trees; and the churned-up sand littered with discarded equipment.

When his company moved inland a short distance, it quickly experienced the frightening precision of the pre-registered Japanese artillery fire:

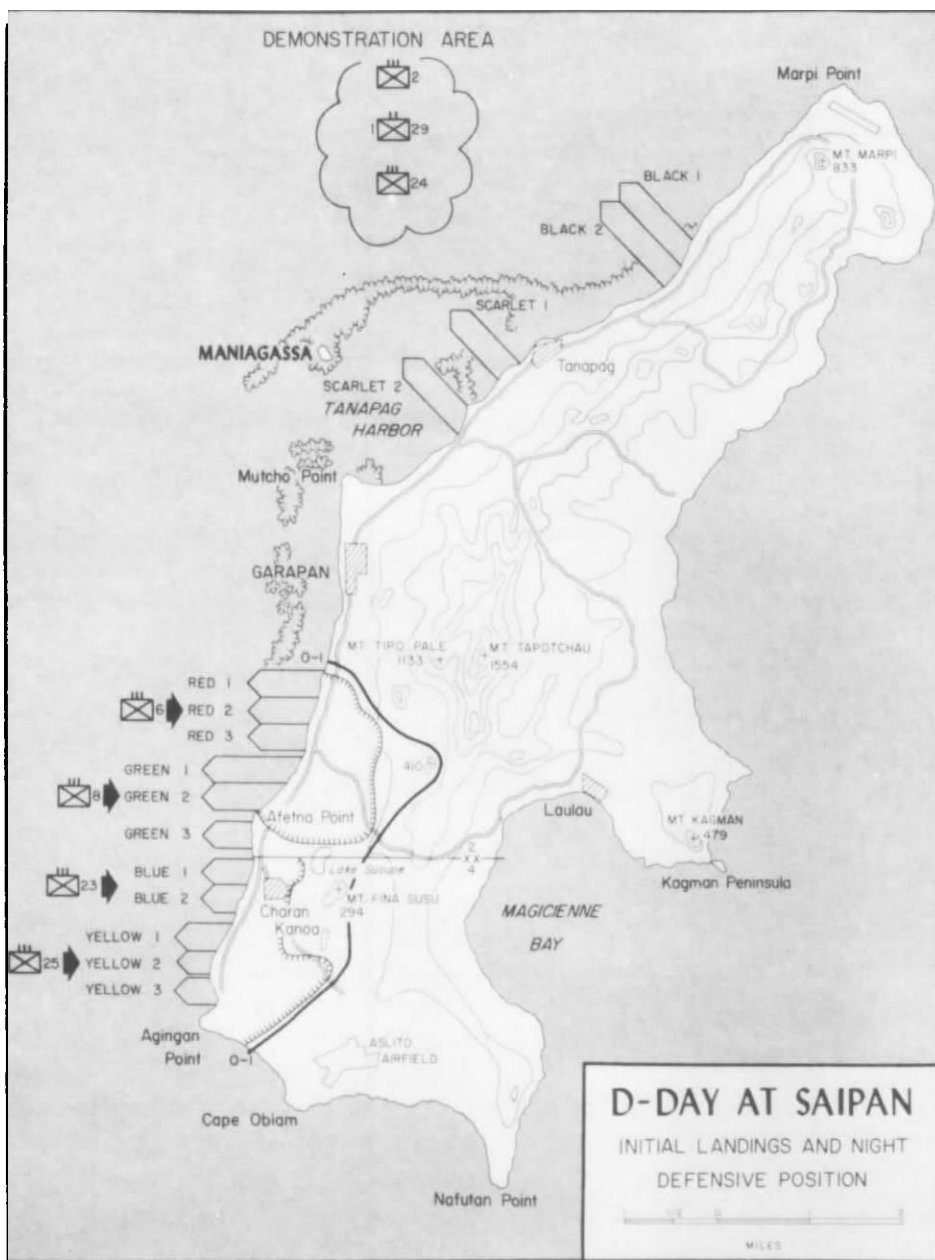
Suddenly, WHAM! A shell hit right on top of us! I was too surprised to think, but instinctively all of us hit the deck and began to spread out. Then the shells really began to pour down on us: ahead, behind, on both sides, and right in our midst. They would come rocketing down with a freight-train roar and then explode with a deafening cataclysm that is beyond description.

It finally dawned on me that the first shell bursts we'd heard had been ranging shots, and now that the Japs were "zeroed in" on us, we were caught in a full-fledged barrage. The fire was hitting us with pin-point accuracy, and it was not hard to see why—towering 1500 feet above us

*"D-Day at Saipan"*

Watercolor by SSgt John Fabion in Marine Corps Art Collection





insisting, "Wake up!" I jerked bolt upright—in combat your reflexes act fast and you never go fully to sleep. A glance at my watch showed that it was almost dawn.

I turned to my runner who was lying against me, asleep. "Let's go!" I said, "Pass the word to the squad leaders to get set." He didn't stir. I shook him. He still didn't move. He was dead. With the callousness that war demands, I rolled him over, reached for his canteen, and poured the precious water into my own canteen. Then I left him lying there . . .

All the assault regiments were taking casualties from the constant shelling that was zeroed in by spotters on the high ground inland. Supplies and reinforcing units piled up in confusion on the landing beaches. Snipers were everywhere. Supporting waves experienced the same deadly enemy fire on their way to the beach. Some LVTs lost their direction, some received direct hits, and others were flipped on their sides by waves or enemy fire spilling their equipment and personnel onto the reef. Casualties in both divisions mounted rapidly.

was Mt. Tapotchau, with Jap observation posts honeycombing its crest.

That night the lieutenant and his runner shared a shallow foxhole and split the watches between them. Death came close:

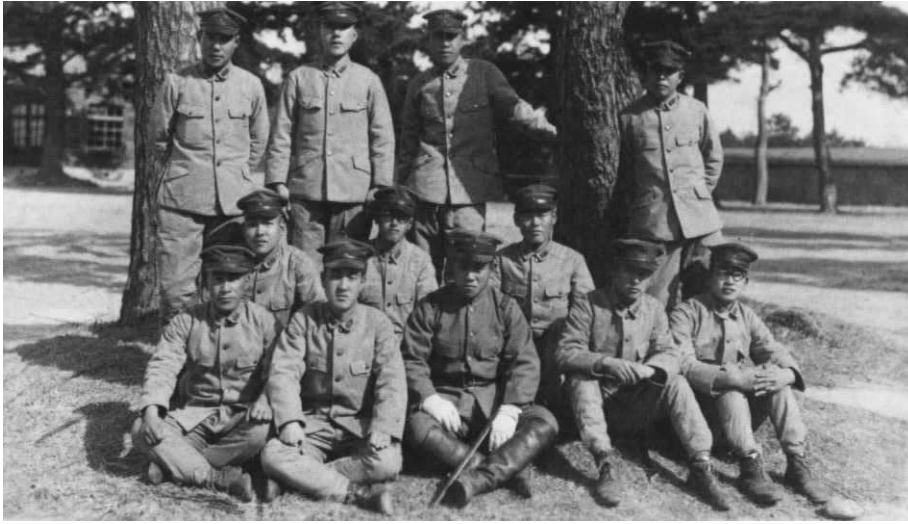
Slowly, very slowly, the hours of my watch passed, and at last I leaned over and shook my runner awake. "It's time for your watch," I whispered. "Look out for that place over there, maybe Japs in it. Keep awake." With that I rolled over on the ground and was asleep in an instant.

Right away, it seemed, someone was shaking me and

*Marines dig in on the beachhead, consolidating their positions, and at the same time preparing to move out on the attack inland.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 81917





Col James A. Donovan Collection

*Members of the Japanese garrison on Saipan pose for a photograph during a more peaceful time before the Marine landing.*

Evacuating them to the ships was extremely dangerous and difficult. Medical aid stations set up ashore were under sporadic enemy fire.

As the Marine artillery also landed in the late afternoon of D-Day and began firing in support of the infantry, it received deadly accurate counter-battery fire from the Japanese. The commander of the 4th Division, Major General Harry Schmidt, came ashore at 1930 and later recalled, "Needless to say, the

command post during that time did not function very well. It was the hottest spot I was in during the war...."

Major James A. Donovan, executive officer of the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, endured a mortar barrage that had uncanny timing and precision:

We entered a little village called Charan-Kanoa. We paused there to get some water. We had been pinched

out of our zone of action. We were washing up and resting when all of a sudden mortar shells started to fall on us. We didn't know it at the time, but in a tall smokestack nearby was a Japanese forward observer. He was directing the fire, looking right down on us. It didn't occur to us that somebody could be up in that smokestack after all the preparatory naval gunfire and everything that had been fired into the area, but he was up there all right. He really caused a great number of casualties in G Company.

He caught us without fox-holes. We had that false sense of security from having been pinched out of the line. We thought we had a chance to relax. We didn't. So all had to dig holes in a hurry, and it's hard to dig a hole when you're lying on your stomach digging with your chin, your elbows, your knees, and your toes. It is possible to dig a hole that way, I found, but we lost far more Marines than we should have

**L**ieutenant General Holland M. Smith, one of the most famous Marines of World War II, was born in 1882. He was commissioned a second lieutenant in 1905. There followed a series of overseas assignments in the Philippines, Nicaragua, Santo Domingo, and with the Marine Brigade in France in World War I. Beginning in the early 1930s, he became increasingly focused on the development of amphibious warfare concepts. Soon after the outbreak of war with Japan in 1941, he came to a crucial position, command of all Marines in the Central Pacific.

As another Marine officer later described him, "He was of medium height, perhaps five feet nine or ten inches, and somewhat paunchy. His once-black hair had turned gray. His once close-trimmed mustache was

somewhat scraggly. He wore steel-rimmed glasses and he smoked cigars incessantly." There was one other feature that characterized him: a ferocious temper that earned him the nickname "Howlin' Mad" Smith, although his close friends knew him as "Hoke."

This characteristic would usually emerge as irritation at what he felt were substandard performances. One famous example of this was his relief of an Army general on Saipan. A huge interservice uproar erupted!

Less than two years later, after 41 years of active service, during which he was awarded four Distinguished Service Medals for his leadership in four successive successful amphibious operations, he retired in April 1946, as a four-star general. He died in January 1967.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 89883

*LtGen Smith in his command post ashore on Saipan uses a high-powered telescope to observe his troops in action.*



# The 2d Marine Division

The origins of this division lay in the activation of the 2d Marine Brigade as part of the Fleet Marine Force on 1 July 1936. A year later the brigade deployed to Shanghai, China, returning in 1938 to San Diego, California.

On 1 February 1941, the unit was redesignated as the 2d Marine Division. Its component regiments, the 2d, 6th, 8th, and 10th Marines, brought with them impressive histories of service in Vera Cruz (Mexico), World War I in France, and the Caribbean.

In World War II, elements of the division served in Iceland, in Hawaii during the attack on Pearl Harbor, and on Samoa, then the full division in the Guadalcanal campaign, followed by the bloody assault of

Tarawa for which it was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation, and on to Saipan, Tinian, and Okinawa.

## The 2d Marine Division Patch

This 2d Marine Division shoulder patch was worn on Saipan. Designed and approved in late 1943, the insignia is in the official Marine Corps colors of scarlet and gold. The insignia displays a spearhead-shaped scarlet background with a hand holding aloft a lighted gold torch. A scarlet numeral "2" is superimposed upon the torch, and the torch and hand are encircled by five white stars in the arrangement of the Southern Cross constellation; under this the division's first World War II combat took place at Guadalcanal.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A412992

before someone finally located that observer up in the smokestack. I don't know how tall the smokestack was, but I would say probably the equivalent of two or three stories high. From up there he could see the entire picture, and he really gave it to us.

The night of D-Day saw continuous Japanese probing of the Marine positions, fire from by-passed enemy soldiers, and an enemy attack in the 4th Division zone screened by a front of civilians. The main counterattack, however, fell on the 6th Marines on the far left of the Marine lines. About 2,000 Japanese started moving south from Garapan, and by 2200 they were ready to attack. Led by tanks the charge was met by a wall of fire from .30-caliber machine guns, 37mm antitank guns, and M-1 rifles. It was too much and they fell back in disarray. In addition to 700 enemy dead, they left one tank. The body of the bugler who blew the charge was slumped over the open

hatch. A bullet had gone straight up his bugle!

One of the crucial assets for the Marine defense that night (and on many subsequent nights) was the illumination provided by star shells fired from Navy ships. Japanese records recovered later from their *Thirty-first Army* message file revealed, "... as soon as the night attack units go forward, the enemy points out targets by using the large star shells which practically turn night into day. Thus the maneuvering of units is extremely difficult."

As the weary Marines finally tried to get some sleep, all along their irregular line of foxholes, two things were very clear to them: they had forced a precarious beachhead in the teeth of bitter enemy fire, and a long, tough battle obviously lay ahead.

While the thoughts of the riflemen focused on survival and the immediate ground in front of them, the senior command echelons saw the initial success of the landings as a culmination of months of planning, training, and organization for

a strategic strike on a crucial Japanese stronghold. The opportunity for this sprang from earlier Central Pacific victories.

The Marine conquest of Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands in November 1943, followed by the joint Marine-Army capture of Kwajalein and Eniwetok atolls in the Marshall Islands in January-February 1944, had broken the outer ring of Japanese defenses and set the stage for succeeding operations.

These earlier victories had moved up the entire American operational timetable for the Central Pacific by three valuable months. After discussions of various alternatives (such as an attack on the vast Japanese base at Truk), the Joint Chiefs of Staff had settled on the next objective: the Mariana Islands. There were to be three principal targets: Saipan, Tinian, and Guam. It was a daring decision, for Saipan was 1,344 miles from the Marshalls and 3,226 miles from Hawaii, but only 1,250 miles from Japan. Furthermore, the islands were linchpins in the revised inner defense line which the

# The 4th Marine Division

This division had its roots in the shifting and redesignation of several other units. The 23d Marines began as infantry detached from the 3d Division in February 1943, the same month that an artillery battalion became the genesis of the 14th Marines and engineer elements of the 19th Marines formed the start of the 20th Marines. In March the 24th Marines was organized, and then in May it was split in two to supply the men for the 25th Marines.

This war-time shuffling provided the major building blocks for a new division. The units were originally separated, however, with the 24th Marines and a variety of reinforcing units (engineer, artillery, medical, motor transport, special weapons, tanks, etc.) at Camp Pendleton in California. The rest of the units were at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. This East Coast echelon moved to

Pendleton by train and also by ship through the Panama Canal in July and August 1943. All the units were now finally together, and thus the 4th Marine Division was formally activated on 14 August 1943.

After intensive training, it shipped out on 13 January 1944, and in 13 short months made four major assault landings: Roi-Namur, Saipan, Tinian, and Iwo Jima, suffering over 17,000 casualties. It was awarded two Presidential Unit Citations and a Navy Unit Commendation, and then deactivated 28 November 1945. In February 1966, however, it was reactivated as the lead division in the Marine Corps Reserve, and it furnished essential units to Desert Storm in the liberation of Kuwait.

## The 4th Marine Division Patch

Worn on Saipan, it had a gold "4" on a scarlet background, the official colors



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) of the U.S. Marine Corps. This emblem was designed by SSgt John Fabion, a member of the division's public affairs office before the Marshalls campaign. His commanding officer was astonished to find that, when the division attacked Roi islet in Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands (January 1944), the layout of the runways on the Japanese airstrip there were "an exact replica."

Japanese felt they absolutely had to hold after their previous losses in the Central and Southwest Pacific.

Saipan represented a wholly new kind of prickly problem for an American assault. Instead of a small, flat coral islet in an atoll, it was a large island target of some 72 square miles, with terrain varying from flat cane fields to swamps to precipitous cliffs to the commanding 1,554-foot-high Mount Tapotchau. Moreover, the Japanese considered it "their own territory," in spite of the fact that it was legally only a mandate provided by the terms of the Versailles Treaty following World War I. The fact that Japan held the islands led it to install a policy of exclusion of all outsiders and the start of military construction, forbidden by the treaty, as early as 1934.

Attacking a formidable objective such as Saipan called for complex planning and much greater force than had previously been needed in the Central Pacific. An elaborate organization was therefore assem-

bled. Admiral Raymond A. Spruance was in overall command of the force detailed to invade the Marianas as well as the naval units needed to protect them. Admiral Turner was in command over the amphibious task force, while Marine Lieutenant General Holland M. Smith was to direct the landing forces on Saipan and then on the neighboring island of Tinian. (A similar command structure, but with different combat units, was set up for the attack on Guam to the south.)

The operation plan for Saipan, code-named Forager, called for an assault on the western side of the island, with the 2d Marine Division on the left and the 4th Marine Division on the right. The Army's 27th Infantry Division was in reserve, ready to be fed into the battle if needed. While each of the two Marine divisions had previously fought as a complete unit, the 27th had experienced only two minor landings (at Makin and Eniwetok

islets) for some of its regiments and battalions.

The intensive training for these three divisions took place in the Hawaiian Islands with Major General Harry Schmidt's 4th Marine Division on Maui, Major General Thomas E. Watson's 2d Marine Division on the "Big Island" of Hawaii, and Army Major General Ralph C. Smith's 27th Infantry Division on Oahu. As Lieutenant Chapin described it:

(These) months were busy, hard-working ones. The replacements that arrived to fill the gaps left by Namur's casualties (in the Kwajalein battle) had to be trained in all the complexities of field work. Most of these replacements were boys fresh from boot camp, and they were ignorant of everything but the barest essentials. Week after week was filled with long marches, field combat problems, live firing, obstacle courses, street fight-



# The Army 27th Infantry Division

This division, before the national emergency was declared in 1940, was a State of New York National Guard organization. It contained many famous old regiments, some dating from the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. In World War II, the division's 165th Infantry had been the renowned old 69th New York Infantry, also known as the "Fighting 69th" and "Fighting Irish" of World War I fame. The first unit of this regiment was organized in 1775.

As the war in Europe grew in intensity, the Selective Service Act gave the President the power to federalize the National Guard. Thus, the 27th Division was activated by President Roosevelt on 25 September 1940. It was first sent to Fort McClellan, Alabama, for intensive training, and then, in December 1941, to California.

On 28 February 1942, the first elements of the division sailed from San Francisco and landed at the town of Hilo on the "Big Island" of Hawaii. During the next two months, the division units were scattered throughout the island for local defense and training. That was the start of the longest wartime overseas service of any National Guard division in the United States Army.

In the fall of 1942, the division was directed to assemble on the island of Oahu. MajGen Ralph C. Smith took over command at that

time. Then in midsummer 1943, orders came to prepare the 165th Infantry Regiment, reinforced by a battalion of the 105th Infantry and an artillery battalion, for an assault to capture the coral atoll of Makin, in the Gilbert Islands chain. Following a four-day battle there, in November 1943, the division furnished a battalion of the 106th Infantry for the unopposed occupation of Majuro in the Marshall Islands in January 1944.

The final prelude to Saipan for units of the 27th came the next month. Two battalions of the 106th fought at Eniwetok Atoll in the Marshalls.

After the division's struggle on Saipan, it went on to the battle for Okinawa in April 1945, and then to the occupation of Japan in September 1945.

The final chapter came in December 1946 when the 27th Infantry Division was deactivated.



In practice it looked different to that lieutenant:

To us in the lower echelons it was just the same old stuff that we'd been doing for a solid year: filing up from compartments below decks to your assigned boat station, going over the side, hurrying down the net to beat the stopwatch, into the heaving LCVP (Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel), and away. Then the interminable hours of circling, meanwhile getting wet, hungry and bored. The K rations (in a waxed box) tasted like

sawdust; the weather got rougher and rougher. Some of the men got seasick, and all of us were soaking wet and cold.

Finally we headed back to our transport and clambered up the cargo net with a sigh of relief. The next day it was the same thing all over again, except that this time we went ashore. This, too, had an awfully familiar feeling: wading through the surf, getting your only pair of shoes and socks wringing wet, and then onto the beach where all the sand migrated inside your shoes. A series of conflicting and confusing orders flowed down through the chain of command: halt and move on, halt and move on, go here, go there.

The vast attack force now gathered at Pearl Harbor. Although there were unfortunate accidents to some of the landing craft, over 800 ships set out in the naval component, some for direct fire support of the troops, some for transport, and some (the fast carrier task force) to make advance air strikes and then to deal with the attack which the landing probably would incite from the Japanese Navy. Holland Smith's V Amphibious Corps, totalling 71,034 Marine and Army troops, sailed with some slow elements starting on 25 May. The specialized craft for the ground forces ran the gamut of acronym varieties. After staging through the Marshalls, the armada headed for the target: Saipan.

At sea the troops got their final briefings: maps of the island (based on recent American aerial and submarine photographs of a hitherto "secret island"), estimates of 15,000 enemy troops (which turned out in the end to be 30,000 under the command of Lieutenant General Yoshitsugu Saito and Vice Admiral Chiuchi Nagumo), and detailed attack plans for two Marine divisions.

ing, judo, calisthenics, night and day attacks and defenses, etc. There were also lectures on the errors we'd made at Namur. Added emphasis was placed on attacking fortified positions. We worked with demolition charges of dynamite, TNT, and C-2 [plastic explosive], and with flame throwers till everyone knew them forward and backward.

The month of May 1944 brought final maneuvers and practice landings for all three divisions. The operation plan looked neatly and efficiently organized on paper.

Simultaneously, the American fast carriers' planes began, on 11 June, their softening-up bombing, combined with attacks on Japanese land-based air. Two days later, the main enemy fleet headed for the Marianas for a decisive battle. Then, on 14 June, the "old battleships" of the U.S. Navy, reborn from the Pearl Harbor disaster, moved in close to Saipan to pound the Japanese defenses with their heavy guns. That night underwater demolition teams made their dangerous swim in close to the assault beaches to check on reefs, channels, mines, and beach defenses. All was now in readiness for the landings.

The bloody business of D-Day was, as the troops well realized, only a beginning, for the long, grueling fight which began the next morning.

### *D+1-D+2, 16-17 June*

The next two days saw the Marine attack resumed all along the irregular front. The 2d Division, after reorganizing, pushed its 6th Marines northeast toward Mount Tipo Pali, its 2d Marines north towards Garapan, and its 8th Marines east into the swamps around Lake Susupe. Direct contact with the 4th Division was finally established.

Close combat was the norm. There were no exceptions for battalion commanders. Lieutenant Colonel Justice M. Chambers, com-

manding the 3d Battalion, 25th Marines in the 4th Division later described two of his experiences on D + 1:

We came to a big bomb crater. The soil had all been thrown up, and around it there were three Marines protected by the dirt. I called up to one of these Marines and asked him what was going on. One of them said that there was an anti-aircraft gun right down in front of them. I crawled up within two or three feet of the top of the dirt and raised up on my hands to see what was down there.

Within about 25 to 30 yards, I was looking right into the muzzle of an 88mm anti-aircraft/antitank gun. They had swung the damn thing around, and it was pointing right up the hill. I was looking right down its muzzle. I dropped as hard as I could and then the damn gun went off. The shell tore through the far side of the bomb crater, came through the dirt on the near side of the bomb crater where I was. It took the head off the Marine with whom I had been talking. The shell went on back and landed about 20 or 30 feet beyond us where it detonated.

Later that same day, he had another close call

We had, as we had advanced, uncovered various Japanese supply caches. One of these was an ammunition dump . . . . About 1505 the Japs blew the large dump near where I was standing and caused numerous concussion casualties including myself . . . . I don't remember a thing about it. The boys tell me that, when the blast went off, I was thrown right up in the air, and I turned a complete flip and then landed on my face.

On the night of D + 1, the Japanese again launched a major attack on the 6th Marines, this time with 44 tanks. Major Donovan later described the wild clash: "The battle evolved itself into a madhouse of noise, tracers, and flashing lights. As tanks were hit and set afire, they silhouetted other tanks coming out of the flickering shadows to the front or already on top of the squads." The Marines poured in their fire, now with 2.36-inch rocket launchers, grenade launchers, self-propelled 75mm guns, and their own artillery and tanks adding to the din. When dawn broke, it was over and the shattered hulks of 24 Japanese tanks lay there smoking.

In the 4th Division zone of action, the left regiment, the 23d, also had a difficult time in the Susupe swamp. The 24th and 25th

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**M**ajor General Harry Schmidt was the leader of the 4th Marine Division in the assaults at Roi-Namur in the Marshall Islands and then at Saipan in the Marianas.

Born in 1886, he entered the Corps as a second lieutenant in 1909. By extraordinary coincidence, his first foreign duty was at Guam in the Marianas Islands, an area he would return to 33 years later under vastly different circumstances!

The Philippines, Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua (where he was awarded a Navy Cross—second only to the Medal

of Honor), interspersed with repeated stays in China, were the marks of a diverse overseas career. At home there were staff schools, paymaster duties, and a tour as Assistant Commandant.

By the end of World War II, he had been decorated with three Distinguished Service Medals. Retiring in 1948 after 39 years of service, he was advanced to the four-star rank of general. His death came in 1968.

A contemporary described him as "a Buddha, a typical old-time Marine: he'd been in China; he was regulation, Old Establishment, a regular Marine."





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 83551

*This Japanese soldier and tank are both permanently finished after an attack on Marine lines.*

drove inland to the east towards the key objective of Aslito airfield. With a danger looming of overextended lines, Lieutenant General Holland Smith pulled the 165th Infantry out of his reserve (the Army's 27th Infantry Division) and sent it ashore on D+2 to reinforce the 4th Marine Division. This same day, Major General Ralph

Smith came ashore to take command of the additional Army units of his 27th Division as they landed.

With the 165th Infantry on its right flank and the 24th Marines to its left, the 25th Marines was poised on the north edge of Aslito airfield late on D+2. Its patrols found the strip was abandoned, but the 165th, assigned to cap-

ture it, decided to wait until the next day.

The division had finally approached the O-1 line, except on the left flank where contact with the 2d Division was again broken, this time near Mount Fina Susu.

This same day, 17 June, saw a crucial command decision by Admiral Spruance. With the power-

**M**ajor General Thomas E. Watson, as a brigadier general and commander of Tactical Group-1, built on the 22d Marines, led his men in the conquest of Eniwetok Atoll in the Marshall Islands in February 1944. For this he was awarded a Distinguished Service Medal, and the 22d Marines was awarded a Navy Unit Commendation.

He took command of the 2d Marine Division in April 1944. In June he directed his men in the conquest of Saipan and then Tinian, receiving a second DSM.

Retirement came in 1950, and he died in March 1966, as a lieutenant general.

With a birth date of 1892, and an enlistment date of 1912, he fully qualified as a member of "the Old Corps." After being commissioned in 1916, he served in a variety of Marine assignments in the Caribbean, China, and the United States.

Given the nickname "Terrible Tommy," Watson's proverbial impatience later was characterized by General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., as follows: "He would not tolerate for one minute stupidity, laziness, professional incompetence, or failure in leadership.... His temper in correcting these failings could be fiery and monumental," as both Marine and Army officers found out at Eniwetok and later Saipan!



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 303240



# Divisional Reorganization

The training before Saipan was based on a new Table of Organization for the Marine divisions. Their size was reduced by 2,500 men to 17,465. The artillery regiments each lost one of its 75mm pack howitzer battalions, but the infantry retained its previous units. Rifle squads, however, were reorganized to total 13, using three "fire teams" of four men with each team built around a Browning automatic rifle (BAR), a 50 percent increase in the division of this valuable weapon. The number of 60mm mortars in the division table of equipment was similarly expanded, while the number of flamethrowers grew ten-fold. In addition, the tank battalions were able to replace their antiquated light tanks with mediums.

ful main Japanese fleet now approaching Saipan, he ordered his fast carriers to meet the enemy ships, and that night withdrew his transports and supply ships from their offshore support positions to a safe distance from the Japanese threat.

*D+3, 18 June*

When the infantrymen ashore woke the next morning, they looked out in amazement at the empty ocean and a wave of uneasy questions raced through their minds: "Where in hell are our ships? What about food and ammunition we've got to have? Will we get back the daytime naval supporting gunfire and also the star shell illumination?" The men in frontline combat had no way of knowing that over 33,000 tons of cargo had

already been unloaded when the ships withdrew.

Both Marine divisions went on the attack, while the 105th Infantry joined the 165th on the far right flank, enabling Ralph Smith to put his 27th Division into motion to occupy Aslito airfield and attack along the southern coast.

That same morning, 18 June, the 4th Marine Division attack objective was the seizure of the O-3 line. This would mean reaching the east coast of Saipan and splitting in two the Japanese forces. First, however, the 23d Marines, reinforced by a battalion of the 24th Marines, had to seize the portion of the O-2 line in its zone. This was to be the division's line of departure. The entire division, with three infantry regiments abreast, jumped off at 1040. At 1340 the 25th Marines had reached O-3. The 24th Marines had

tank-led Japanese counterattacks on both flanks but was able to reach O-3 before dark.

The 23d Marines, however, was stopped by intense enemy mortar and machine gun fire coming from southeast of Lake Susupe right on the boundary line between the two Marine divisions, making it unclear which division had responsibility for wiping out these enemy positions. At the same time, it was impossible to fire artillery on them for fear of hitting friendly troops. As a result, the 23d Marines suffered heavy casualties. So, by the end of the day, although all of the 4th Marine Division's regiments were in contact, a gap still existed between the two Marine divisions.

The bizarre becomes commonplace in combat. For instance, one of the 23d Marines' 75mm half-tracks fired into a Japanese cave that day, and a dense cloud of noxious fumes came pouring out. A gas alarm was sounded. This meant serious trouble, for all the riflemen had long since jettisoned their burdensome gas masks. Relief flooded through the men as it was established that the fumes were not poisonous and came from picric acid the Japanese had stored in the cave.

Over in the 2d Division's zone, the 8th Marines saw some bitter fighting over Hill 240. A heavily defended coconut grove required saturation fire from the artillery of the

## Ground Command List

The Marine and Army units assigned to the Saipan operation were under these senior commanders:

V Amphibious Corps - LtGen Holland M. Smith  
2d Marine Division - MajGen Thomas E. Watson  
2d Marines - Col Walter J. Stuart  
6th Marines - Col James P. Riseley  
8th Marines - Col Clarence R. Wallace  
10th Marines - Col Raphael Griffin  
18th Marines - LtCol Russell Lloyd  
4th Marine Division - MajGen Harry Schmidt  
14th Marines - Col Louis G. DeHaven

20th Marines - LtCol Nelson K. Brown  
23d Marines - Col Louis R. Jones  
24th Marines - Col Franklin A. Hart  
25th Marines - Col Merton J. Batchelder  
27th Infantry Division - MajGen Ralph C. Smith, USA  
105th Infantry - Col Leonard A. Bishop, USA  
106th Infantry - Col Russell G. Ayres, USA  
165th Infantry - Col Gerard W. Kelley, USA  
Division Artillery - BGen Redmond F. Kernan, Jr., USA  
XXIV Corps Artillery - BGen Arthur M. Harper, USA  
Saipan Garrison Forces - MajGen George W. Griner, USA

10th Marines before the riflemen could smash their way in and clean out the grove.

The price for the two Marine divisions had been heavy. By the night of D+3 they had been bled by more than 5,000 casualties.

### *D+4-D+7, 19-22 June*

The most critical event of 19 June (and perhaps the most important of the whole Saipan campaign) took place at sea, well out of sight of the infantrymen ashore. The opposing carrier task forces clashed in a gigantic air battle. When it was over that night, the Japanese had suffered the catastrophic loss of 330 out of 430 planes they had launched. Exultant U.S. Navy fliers labelled it "The Great Marianas Turkey Shoot." With the help of American submarines

and additional carrier plane attacks the next day, the Japanese attempt to relieve Saipan by a decisive naval victory was smashed. As an official account summarized the impact ashore, "the eventual doom of the enemy garrison was assured." And the American supply ships were able to return offshore to unload their vital cargoes.

During the four-day span of D+4 to D+7, the 105th Infantry moved slowly along the south coast and then joined the 165th Infantry in sealing off the die-hard Japanese survivors in Nafutan Point, in the southeastern corner of the island. Once the enemy was penned in, the 105th was assigned to eliminate him. The rest of the 27th Division, now including the 106th Infantry, was ordered north to be the Corps reserve.

This period, 19-22 June, marked a total shift in direction for the Ameri-

can troops. Pivoting on the 2d Marines on the far left flank along the western shore, the other Marine regiments swung around from their drive which had reached the east coast to face north, with their right flank on Magicienne Bay.

On 20 June, the 4th Division confronted a key objective. Lieutenant Chapin had a ringside seat:

We had a perfect chance to watch a battalion of the 25th making an attack . . . . It was in action about a quarter of a mile from us, and the whole panorama was spread out before us. They were assaulting Hill 500, the dominant terrain feature of the whole area, and it was apparent that they were running into a solid wall of Jap fire. But, using [artillery] timed fire, smoke, and tanks, they finally stormed the top

## Marine Artillery Regiments

The 10th Marines and the 14th Marines supported the 2d and 4th Marine Divisions respectively. They had each had a significant reorganization before Saipan. In early spring, the 5th Battalion in each changed its designation. They were redesignated the 2d and 4th 155mm Artillery Battalions, Corps Artillery, but adminis-

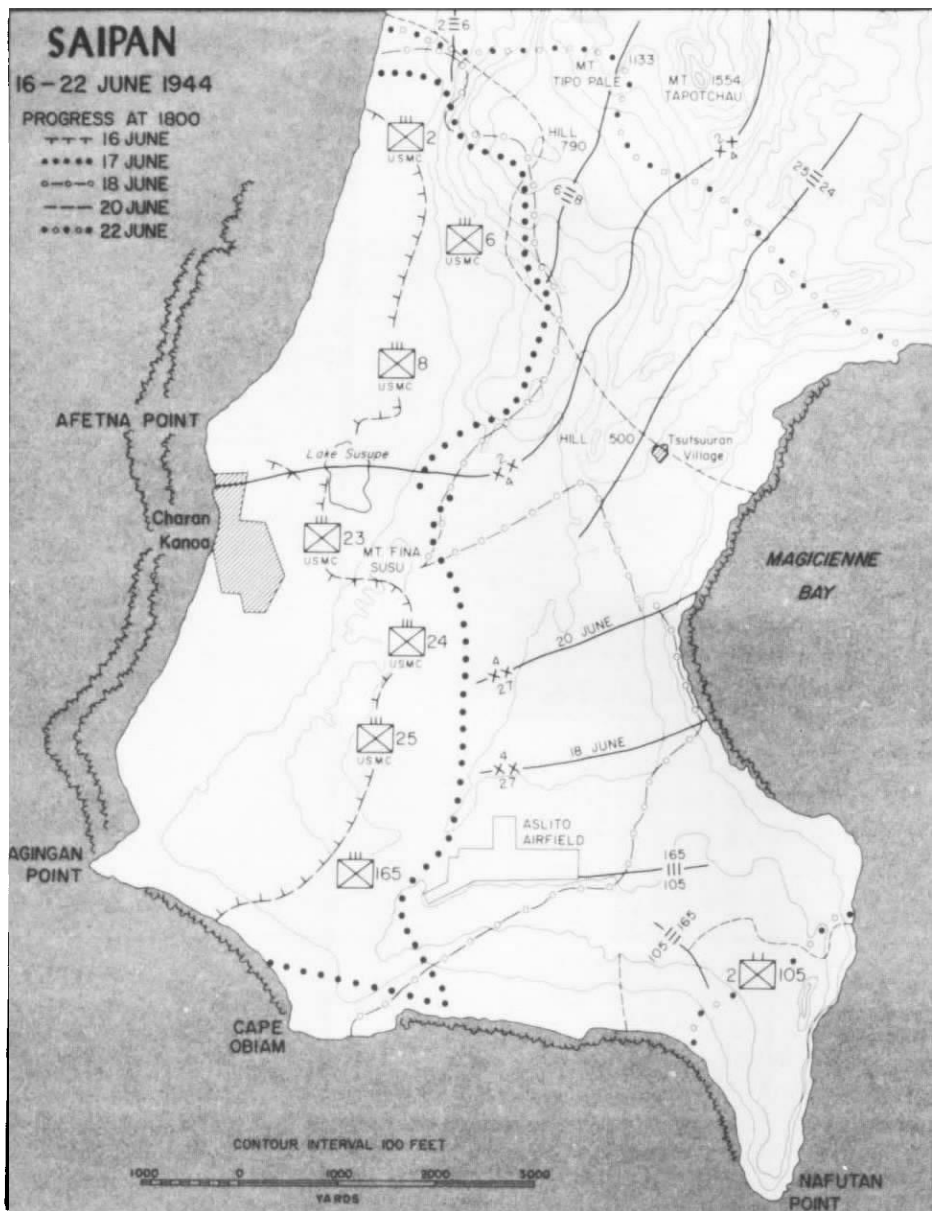
*Friendly artillery fire was a major asset for the American troops, both in supporting their attacks and smothering*

tratively attached to the 10th and 14th Marines. Thus the 10th and 14th Marines each contained two 75mm pack howitzer battalions (1st and 2d), two 105mm howitzer battalions (3d and 4th), and a 155mm artillery battalion, armed with the new M1 155mm howitzers, the first to be received by the Marine Corps in the Pacific.

*Japanese sorties. This camouflaged emplacement holds a Marine 105mm howitzer.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 82550





tions. Did they ever taste good to our hungry palates, surfeited as they were with K rations!"

Simultaneously, intensive preparations were made for a coordinated attack by both Marine divisions the next morning. A total of 18 artillery battalions were massed for supporting fire. Combat efficiency was officially rated as "very satisfactory," in spite of a sobering total of 6,165 casualties.

The following day saw the Marines attack all along the line. The 6th Marines overran parts of Mount Tipo Pali, while the 8th Marines worked its painful way into the maze of ridges and gullies that formed the foothills of Mount Tapotchau. On the right, the 24th Marines was forced into the messy business of blasting caves honeycombed along Magicienne Bay. In one of the mortar platoons, a weird encounter took place, as described at the time to this author by the participant, First Lieutenant Joseph J. Cushing:

[I] was bending over one of [my] mortars, checking the lay of it, when [I] felt a tap on my shoulder, and a guy asked [me], "Hey, Mac, are you a Marine?" [I] turned around and there was a Jap officer standing about a foot from [me]. [I] dropped to the ground, speechless with amazement, and [my] men riddled the Jap from head to toe.

On the left of the 4th Division, the 25th Marines made a major advance of 2,400 yards. The forward lines were now reaching an area where the Kagman Peninsula jutted out to the east. This resulted in a substantially increased frontage that the two Marine divisions could not properly cover. To deal with this, Holland Smith decided to commit his reserve, the 27th Infantry Division, to the center of the line, leaving just one battalion of the 105th Infantry way back in the rear

and took it. The use of those supporting arms provided a magnificent spectacle. From our vantage point, we could see the timed fire bursting in cave entrances, and moving down the face of the hill as precisely as if . . . it were going down a stepladder. On the lower levels, the flame-thrower tanks were spouting their napalm jets upward into other caves. It was quite a sight!

Over in the area of the 2d Division, the 8th Marines wheeled from facing east to attack northward into the foot hills leading to Mount Tapotchau.

The Marine divisions were now facing two major problems. First, their drive north was confronted by General Saito's main line of defense, running west to east across the island. Secondly, the terrain into which the attack had to go was a nightmare of ravines, caves, hills, valleys, and cliffs — all fortified and defended to the death by the Japanese.

June 21 brought a respite for the front line troops: "D+6 was enjoyed by all— for a change! We rested on our positions; caught up on sorely needed sleep; got some water (which had been conspicuous by its absence); and even had a good hot meal. For we got our first 10-in-1 ra-





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 83918

*Still another cane field, with its hidden Japanese defenders lying in wait, confronts these Marine riflemen.*

to continue its long drawn-out attempt to eliminate the Japanese pocket on by-passed Nafutan Point.

This day (D+7) was also marked by the arrival of P-47 Thunderbolts of the 19th Fighter Squadron, U.S. Army Air Forces, which landed at Aslito Field. They had been launched from Navy escort carriers. When landed, they were fitted with launching racks for rockets by ground crews who had come in earlier. Later that day, eight planes took off on their first support mission of the Saipan campaign. (Only two Marine observation squadrons, VMO-2 and VMO-4, were involved in the battle for Saipan, but they provided invaluable artillery spotting for the two Marine divisions.)

While these developments were taking place in the upper echelons, down in the rock-bottom basic life of infantry platoons, the days of relentless combat pressure were exemplified by their impact on the constant duties and high stress levels on a platoon commander:

I made a final inspection of the platoon position and then sacked in—exhausted. When it came my turn to stand watch, it took every last reserve of willpower and strength to get

up and go on duty. Then for hours I alternated between fighting off my sleepiness and sweating out the noises and movements that were all around us.

After a while, I spotted a shape, darker than the rest of the surrounding shadows. It was the size of a man's head. I watched it for a long time, nerves on edge, finger on my carbine trigger. Finally it seemed to move. I fired a shot. Nothing happened. It would've been suicide to go over and investigate. In that darkness and jungle my own men would've shot me in a second. So when it came time for my relief, I pointed out the suspicious object to the next man, told him to watch it closely, and collapsed into a dead-tired sleep.

When dawn came on D+8, I was awakened, and the first thing I did was to look over where I'd shot on the night before. There, lying on top of a rock, was the gas mask of one of my men! The owner had been sleeping right beside it. It was a miracle he hadn't been

hit. The tremendous strain of the previous night did funny things to your mind . . . .

*D+8-D+15, 23-30 June*

Complications of a serious nature arose in the execution of the battle plan for 23 June. The battalion of the 105th Infantry still had not cleaned out Nafutan Point; there were semantic and communications differences between the two Smith generals as to orders about who would do what and when; the 106th and 165th Infantry got all tangled up in themselves during a march to take over the center portion of the American lines and were too late to jump off in the attack, thus delaying the attacks of the Marines. When the Army regiments did move out, they found that the rugged terrain in their sector and the determined enemy in camouflaged weapons positions in caves of the steep slope leading up to Mount Tapotchau made forward progress slow and difficult. The 27th Infantry Division was stalled.

The corps commander, Holland Smith, was very displeased with this situation. It had started with the difficulties experienced in get-

ting that division ashore; it was exacerbated by the time it was taking to secure Nafutan Point and the mix-up in orders there; now the advancing Marine divisions were getting infiltration and enfilading fire on their flanks because of the 27th's lack of progress.

Accordingly, Lieutenant General Holland Smith met that afternoon with Major General Sanderford Jarman, USA, who was slated to be the island garrison commander, and asked him to press Major General Ralph Smith for much more aggressive action by the 27th. Jarman later stated:

I talked to General (Ralph) Smith and explained the situation as I saw it and that I felt from reports from the corps commander that his division was not carrying its full share. He immediately replied that such was true; that he was in no way satisfied with what his regimental commanders had done during the day and that he had been with them and had pointed out to them the situa-

tion. He further indicated to me that he was going to be present tomorrow, 24 June, with his division when it made its jump-off and he would personally see to it that the division went forward . . . . He appreciated the situation and thanked me for coming to see him and stated that if he didn't take his division forward tomorrow he should be relieved.

This blunt meeting was followed the next morning (D+9) by an even blunter message from Holland Smith to Ralph Smith:

Commanding General is highly displeased with the failure of the 27th Division on June twenty-third to launch its attack as ordered at King hour and the lack of offensive action displayed by the division in its failure to advance and seize objective O-5 when opposed by only small arms and mortar fire.

The failure of the 27th to advance in its zone of action resulted in the halting of attacks by the 4th and 2d Marine Divi-

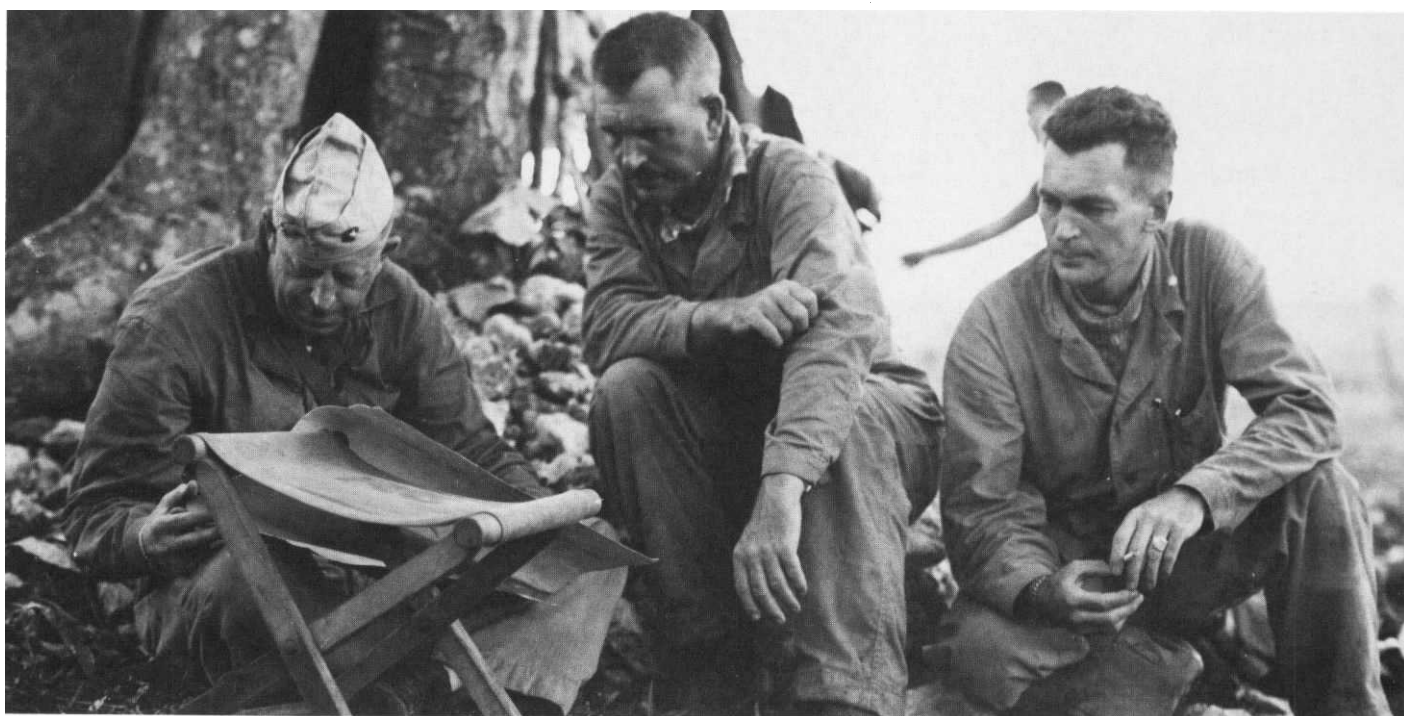
sions on the flanks of the 27th in order to prevent dangerous exposure of their interior flanks. It is directed that immediate steps be taken to cause the 27th Division to advance and seize the objectives as ordered.

These objectives were given dramatic names by the Army regiments: Hell's Pocket, Death Valley, and Purple Heart Ridge. It was certainly true that the terrain was perfect for the dug-in Japanese defenders: visibility from the slopes of Mount Tapotchau and from the ridge gave them fields of fire to rake any attack up the valley. Holland Smith didn't fully recognize the severity of the opposition, and, by the end of the day, the 106th Infantry had gained little, while the 165th Infantry had been "thrown back onto the original line of departure."

Meanwhile, the 2d Marine Division on the left was painfully slugging its way forward in the tortuous environs around Mount Tapotchau. The 4th Marine Divi-

*From left, BGen Merritt A. Edson, Assistant Division Commander of the 2d Marine Division, confers with Col James P. Riseley and LtCol Kenneth F. McLeod, 6th Marines commander and executive officer, respectively, during a pause in the action. LtCol McLeod was killed several days after this photograph.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 82481



sion (on the right) pivoted east, driving fast into the Kagman Peninsula. There the ground was level, a plus, but covered with cane fields, a big minus, as the rifle companies well knew.

A platoon leader remarked:

The terrain here consisted of countless cane fields—one after another. And it was the same old story: in every field the company would lose a man or two. It was wonderfully quieting to the nerves to start into a growth of head-high cane, and wonder who would not be coming out on the other side! The Jap snipers who were doing the damage were dug in so deeply, and camouflaged so well, that it was impossible to locate them before they fired. And then it was too late; you were right on top of them, and they had nailed another one of your men – or maybe you! Then there was always that next cane field up ahead. . . .

Some of the fields had been burnt out by the napalm-bombing of our planes. This gave us greatly increased observation as we went through them, but clouds of choking dust arose from the ashes to plague us and dirty our weapons. With water so scarce, one of our chief sources of liquid sustenance was sugar cane juice. We'd whack off a segment of the cane with our combat knives, then chew and suck on it till only the dry fibers were left. In these burnt-out fields we weren't even able to do this, as the cane was spoiled and tasted lousy.

Along with the death toll in the cane fields came the physical demands placed on the troops by the hot tropical climate. Lieutenant Chapin noted small, human issues that loomed large in the minds of the assault troops:

All this time the sun was broiling down on top of us. Our canteens had been empty

for hours. Everyone was absolutely parched. . . . Finally we did stop, as the effects of heat exhaustion and lack of water started to become apparent. [Our company commander] arranged for some water to be brought up to our position. When the cans arrived, everyone crowded thirstily around, and we had to order the men to disperse. . . . Then each platoon leader rationed out a can of the precious liquid amongst his men. As was the age-old Marine tradition, we waited till all our men had their share before we took ours. The water was lukewarm, rusty, and oily as it came out of the cans, but it still tasted like nectar!

While these local events transpired on the front lines, a major upheaval was taking place in the rear. Seeing that the corps line would be bent back some 1,500 yards in the zone of the 27th Infantry Division, Holland Smith had

*This Marine is demonstrating the dimensions of a large enemy Japanese were not able to complete construction. gun emplacement and undoubtedly giving thanks that the*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 85336







Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 81845

As the fighting reached the interior of Saipan, the troops encountered difficult foliage and terrain which impeded their movement.

Note the tops of the helmets of Marines peering from their foxholes.

had enough. He went to see Admirals Spruance and Turner to obtain permission to relieve Ralph Smith of command of his division.

After reviewing the Marine general's deeply felt criticism of the 27th Infantry Division's "defective performance," the admirals agreed to the requested change, and Ralph Smith was superseded by Major General Jarman on 24 June.

A furor arose, with bitter interservice recriminations, and the flames were fanned by lurid press reports. Holland Smith summarized his feelings three days after the relief. According to a unit history, *The 27th Infantry Division in World War II*, he stated, "The 27th Division won't fight, and Ralph Smith will not make them fight." Army generals were furious, and in Hawaii, Lieutenant General Robert Richardson, commander of the U.S. Army in the Pacific (USARPAC) convened an Army board of inquiry over the matter. The issue reached to the highest military levels in Washington.

While the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Joseph T. McNarney, reviewed the matter, he found some faults with Holland Smith, but then went on to say that Ralph Smith failed to exact the performance expected from a well-trained division, as evidenced by poor leadership on the part of some regimental and battalion commanders, undue hesitancy to bypass snipers "with a tendency to alibi because of lack of reserves to mop up," poor march discipline, and lack of reconnaissance.

The Army's official summary, *United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific, Campaign in the Marianas* (published 15 years after the operations) attributed some errors to Holland Smith's handling of a real problem, and it also gave full recognition to the difficult terrain and bitter resistance that the Army regiments faced. The history stated that:

. . . there is no doubt that the 106th Infantry Regiment of the 27th Division was late in jumping off in the attack on

the morning of 23 June—even though not so late as Holland Smith charged. On the 23d and again on the 24th, the Army troops attacking Death Valley were slow and faltering in their advance. According to the testimony of General Jarman, who took over the division from Ralph Smith, the unit leaders of the 106th Infantry were hesitant and apparently confused. Although the Army troops in Death Valley sustained fairly heavy casualties, the two Marine divisions on the flanks suffered greater ones. Yet the Marines made considerable advances while the 165th Infantry registered only small gains—the 106th Infantry almost none at all.

No matter what the extenuating circumstances were—and there were several—the conclusion seems inescapable that Holland Smith had good reason to be disappointed with the performance of the 27th Infantry Division on the two days in question. . . .

Back where the conflict was with the Japanese, the 4th Marine Division had overrun most of the Kagman Peninsula by the night of D+10. The shoreline cliffs provoked sobering thoughts in a young officer in the 24th Marines:

We were close to the northern shoreline of the peninsula. And right there the Japs had dug a big emplacement. They hadn't had time to finish it, but we could see that it was situated so as to fire right down the beach-line. Any troops landing on that beach would have received a terrible enfilading fire from this gun position. Not far from the emplacement were the guns that had been destined to go into it: huge, 5-inch, dual-purpose naval guns. They were deadly things, and I was glad the enemy had never gotten them into action. Now they lay

there on their wooden skids, thickly coated with grease, wrapped in burlap—impotent.

This unfinished state of the Japanese defenses was, in fact, a critical factor in the final American victory on Saipan. The blockading success of far-ranging submarines of the U.S. Navy had drastically reduced the supplies of cement and other construction materials destined for elaborate Saipan defenses, as well as the number of troop ships carrying Japanese reinforcements to the island. Then the quick success of the Marshalls campaign had speeded up the Marianas thrust by three months. This was decisive, for "one prisoner of war later said that, had the American assault come three months later, the island would have been impregnable."

The 4th Marine Division encountered more than cane fields in the Kagman Peninsula—the cliffs near the ocean were studded with

caves. A 20-year-old private first class in Company E, 2d Battalion, 23d Marines, Robert F. Graf, described the Marine system for dealing with these and the others that were found all through the bitter campaign:

The firepower was intense, and we were working our way up to where the shots originated. Quite often there would be multi cave openings, each protecting another. Laying down heavy cover fire, our specialist would advance to near the mouth of the cave. A satchel charge would then be heaved into the mouth of the cave, followed by a loud blast as the dynamite exploded. Other times it might be grenades thrown inside the cave, both fragment type which exploded sending bits of metal all

*When a Japanese survivor did emerge from a cave, Marines were always on the alert for treachery. This enemy soldier had a stick of*

*dynamite in his hands, but was shot before he could throw it.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 87137



throughout the cave, and other times [white] phosphorous grenades that burned the enemy.

Also the flame thrower was used, sending a sheet of flame into the cave, burning anyone that was in its path. Screams could be heard and on occasions the enemy would emerge from the caves, near the entrance, we would call upon the tanks, and these monsters would get in real close and pump shells into the opening.

Graf went on to picture the use of flame-throwing tanks, the ultimate weapon for dealing with the enemy deep in his hideouts. He continued:

Some of the caves had artillery mounted on tracks that could be wheeled to the entrance, fired and pulled back, unobserved. There were caves with reinforced metal doors that protected them from our artillery. Perhaps a direct hit from a 16-inch naval gun could

have blasted it open, but nothing else.

A fellow rifleman from Graf's company told him this story:

You should go up and see the huge cave that I was just in. It was large and contained a completely equipped operating room, all the medical equipment, surgical tools, etc. The tools were made from German surgical steel. When the battalion and regimental doctors were told about it, they almost went

*Displaying the bazooka which knocked out four Japanese light tanks are bazooka men PFC Lauren N. Kahn, left, and PFC Lewis M. Nalder. The two Marines fired all their ammunition at Japanese tanks advancing in a counterattack on the night of D+1. Kahn then*

*grabbed some grenades, approached one tank from the side, and tossed the grenade into its open turret. Their action saved a 37mm gun crew, the objective of the tank. The gun crew, with its men wounded, was also out of ammunition.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 85167







Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 83566

*Some of the Japanese caves, such as this one, had been carefully reinforced. Marine riflemen move warily to inspect it.*

crazy over finding such excellent equipment. Each doctor wanted some tools for his use.

These attacks on caves were a tricky business, because of orders not to kill any civilians who were also inside many of them, hiding from the fighting. Graf recounted his experiences further:

Throughout the campaign we were taking prisoners.

Seldom were they Japanese soldiers, instead Korean and Chamorro laborers, both men and women, who mostly worked in the sugar cane fields and processing plants. Chamorros were natives of the islands, while the Koreans, of course, were brought over as forced labor. Approaching us, hands up, and smiling and bowing the Koreans would say in understandable broken English, "Me Korean, not Japanese." Some

Japanese civilians were also captured. The Japanese tradition was that the male members of the family were the dominant members. Several times when we tried to feed newly captured women and children first, the male would shove them aside and demand to be first for rations. A few raps to the chest with a rifle butt soon cured them of that habit.

As the sick, scared, and often starving civilians would emerge from their hideouts, there were many pitiful scenes:

One sad incident I recall was when a captured civilian Japanese woman came up to me. She was crying and when she got close to me she started hitting me on the arm and pointing to my pack. I did not know what she wanted until an interpreter came over and explained that she wanted some food and

water for her dead child. She pointed to a wicker basket that contained her dead infant. I gave her what she requested, and she placed the food and water in the basket so that the child could have nourishment on the way to meet the baby's ancestors.

Physical conditions of many were pitiful. Every illness that we had been briefed on was observed: leprosy, dengue fever, yaws and many cases of elephantiasis. Most of them were skeleton thin, as they had no nourishment for many days. Many were suffering from shock caused by the shelling and bombing, and fright because they did not have the vaguest idea as to what we would do to them. Civilians caught in a war that was not of their making. . . .



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 83266

*Marine talks a terrified Chamorro woman and her children into leaving her refuge.*

*Civilians are escorted back to safety, food, and medical care.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 83013



One of the captured persons impressed Graf so very much that the memory was vivid many years later. A Japanese woman, obviously an aristocrat, probably a wife or mistress of a high-ranking officer, "was captured. She was dressed in traditional Japanese clothing: a brilliant kimono, a broad sash around the waist, hair combed, lacquered and spotlessly clean. Although," as Graf remarked, "she knew not what her fate would be in the hands of us, the barbarians, she stood there straight, proud, and seemingly unafraid. To me, she seemed like a queen."

Over on the west side of Saipan, the 2d Marine Division had a memorable day on 25 June. Ever since the landing, the towering peak of Mount Tapotchau had swarmed with Japanese artillery spotters looking straight down on every Marine move and then calling in precisely accurate fire on the American troops. Now, however, in a series of brilliant tactical maneuvers, with a battalion of the 8th Marines clawing up the eastern slope, a battalion of the 29th Marines (then attached to the 8th Marines) was able to infiltrate around the right flank in single file behind a screen of smoke and gain the dominating peak without the loss of a single man.

Meanwhile, back at Nafutan Point, the battalion of the 105th Infantry assigned to clean out the bypassed Japanese pockets had had continuous problems. The official Army account commented, "The attack of the infantry companies was frequently uncoordinated; units repeatedly withdrew from advanced positions to their previous night's bivouacs; they repeatedly yielded ground they had gained."

The stalemate came to a climax on the night of D+11. Approximately 500 of the trapped Japanese, all the able-bodied men who remained, passed "undetected" or "sneaked through" (as the Army later reported) the lines of the encircling battalion. The enemy headed for nearby



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 83989

*The 37mm gun was a workhorse for the Marines in a wide variety of firing missions. Those are Japanese bullet holes in its "shield."*

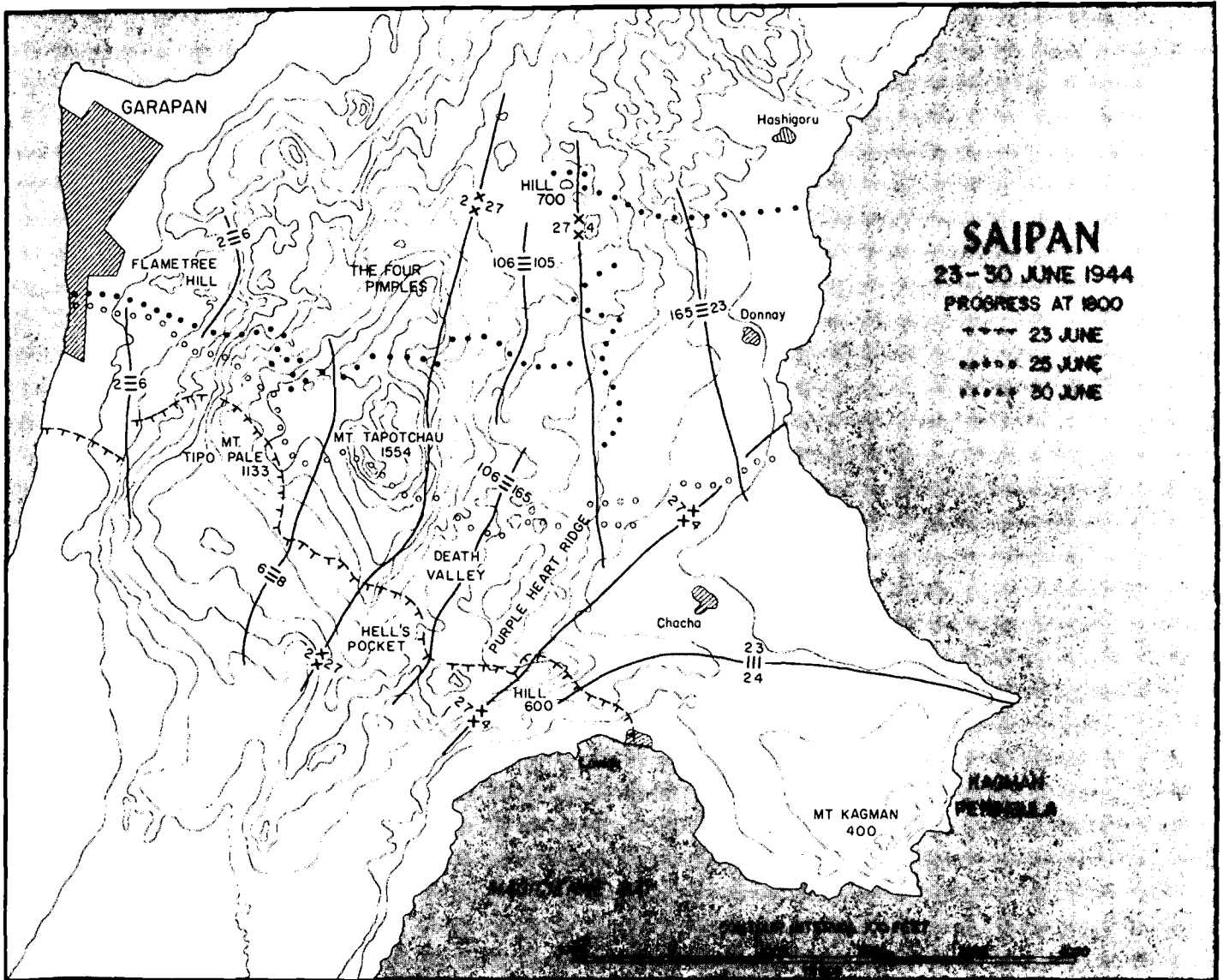
Aslito airfield and there was chaos initially there. One P-47 plane was destroyed and two others damaged. The Japanese quickly continued on to Hill 500, hoping to reunite there with their main forces. What they found instead was the 25th Marines resting in reserve with an artillery battalion of the 14th Marines. The escaping Japanese were finished off the following morning.

On the front lines in the center of the island, General Jarman, now in temporary command of the 27th Infantry Division, took direct action that same day (D+11). An inspection by two of his senior officers of the near edge of Death Valley revealed that battalions of the 105th Infantry "were standing still when there was no reason why they should not move forward." That did it. Jarman relieved the colonel commanding the 106th and replaced him with his division chief of staff. (Nineteen other officers of the 27th Infantry Division were also relieved after the Saipan battle was over, although only one of them had commanded a unit in battle.)

While these developments were taking place in the upper echelons,

the junior officers in the front lines had their own, more immediate, daily concerns. As the author recalled:

I had worked out a pre-sleep routine which I followed every night without fail. Before I lay down, I would make careful mental notes of where the company Command Post [CP] was and where my squad leaders' fox-holes were. Then I would work out the rotation of the watches with my CP group. Next came a check of my carbine to make sure it was in perfect operating condition. When all this had been done, I'd lie down, adjusting my helmet to serve as a pillow. Last, and most important, was the placing of my weapons: my carbine lay across my body so my hand would fall naturally on the trigger; my combat knife was stuck in the ground where my right hand lay; and my grenades were carefully arayed at my left hand. Then I'd drift off to sleep.



For the next several days, the 27th Infantry Division probed and maneuvered and attacked at Hell's Pocket, Death Valley, and Purple Heart Ridge. On 28 June, Army Major General George W. Griner, who had been quickly sent from Hawaii upon the relief of Ralph Smith, took over command of the division, so Jarman could revert to his previous assignment as garrison force commander. The 106th marked the day by eradicating the last enemy resistance in the spot that had caused so much grief: Hell's Pocket.

The 2d Marine Division meanwhile inched northward toward the town of Garapan, meeting ferocious enemy resistance. Tipo Pali was now in 6th Marines' hands. The 8th Marines encountered four small

*A Marine 81mm mortar crew keeps lobbing shells into enemy positions ahead of the unit it is supporting by fire.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 82260







Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 83281

*With the Japanese well dug in, hidden in their well camouflaged positions, a satchel charge of high explosive is tossed into their laps. If any of them bolt out, the Marine riflemen are ready.*

hills strongly defended by the enemy. Because of their size in comparison with Mount Tapotchau, they were called "pimples." Each was named after a battalion commander. Painfully, one by one, they were assaulted and taken over the next few days.

Near Garapan, about 500 yards to the front of the 2d Marines' lines, an enemy platoon on what was named "Flame Tree Hill" was well dug in, utilizing the caves masked by the bright foliage on the hill. The morning of 29 June, a heavy artillery barrage as well as machine gun and mortar fire raked the slopes of the hill. Then friendly mortars laid a smoke screen. This was followed by a pause in all firing. As hoped, the enemy raced from their caves to repel the expected attack. Suddenly the mortars lobbed high explosives on the hill. Artillery shells equipped with time fuses and machine gun and rifle fire laid down another heavy barrage. The enemy, caught in the open, was wiped out almost to a man.

To the right, the 6th Marines mopped up its area and now held the most commanding ground, with all three of its battalions in favorable positions. In fact, since replacement drafts had not yet arrived, the 2d Marine Division had all three of its infantry regiments deployed on line. Thus it was necessary for its commander, Major General Watson, to organize a division reserve from support units.

The pressure on manpower was further illustrated by the fact that, in this difficult terrain, "eight stretcher bearers were needed to evacuate one wounded Marine." In addition, there was, of course, the deep-seated psychological and physical pressure from the constant, day after day, close combat. "Everyone on the island felt the weight of fatigue settling down."

*During a break in the fighting, Marines of a flamethrower and demolitions team pose with the Japanese flag captured during action after the American landing.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 82608



On the 4th Division front, the drive forward was easier, but its left flank had to be bent sharply backward toward the 27th Infantry Division. By nightfall on 28 June, the Marine division's lines formed an inverted L with the 23d Marines and part of the 165th Infantry facing north, while the rest of the Army regiment and two battalions of the 24th Marines faced west. This strange alignment was a focus of attention when each battalion was issued its nightly overlay from corps headquarters showing the lines of the corps at that time, so that friendly fire from artillery and supporting Navy destroyers would not hit friendly troops. Once again, enemy planes raided, hitting both the airfield and anchorage. As usual, enemy night patrols were active.

The end of the saga of Nafutan Point, way to the rear, had come the day before (27 June). The Japanese breakout had left almost no fighting men behind there. Accordingly, the battalion of the 105th Infantry at last overran the area after enduring a final banzai charge. The soldiers found over 500 enemy bodies in the area, some killed in the charge and some by their own hand.

D+15 (30 June) marked a good day for the Army. After fierce fighting, the 27th Infantry Division finally burst through Death Valley, captured Purple Heart Ridge, and drew alongside the 8th Marines. Holland Smith gave due recognition: "No one had any tougher job to do." The gaps on the flanks with the 2d and 4th Marine Divisions were now closed. In doing so, the Army had sustained most of the 1,836 casualties inflicted upon it since D-Day. The 4th Marine Division, however, had suffered 4,454 casualties to date, while the 2d Marine Division had lost 4,488 men.

The corps front now ran from Garapan, past the four pimples, to the 4th Marine Division's left boundary. Here, it ran sharply



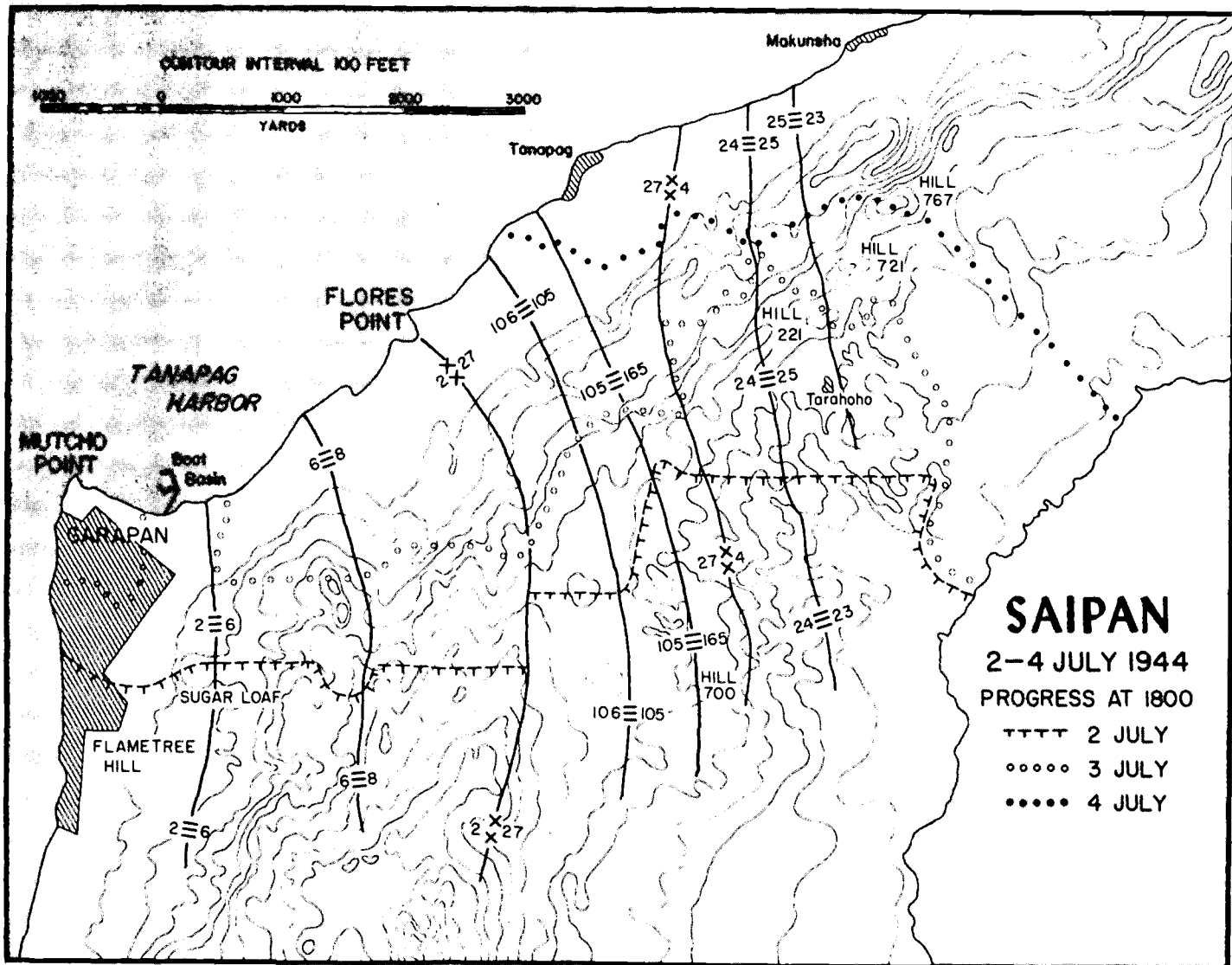
Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 85222

*Moving on the double, Marines go yard by yard through skeletal Garapan, flushing out the Japanese defenders.*

*Amidst the horrors of war, someone retained a sense of humor, and put up this pre-World War II Marine recruiting poster in Garapan.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 87109





northward to Hill 700. From there it ran to the east coast. Central Saipan was in American hands. Most of the replenishment supplies had been unloaded. The enemy had begun withdrawing to his preplanned final defensive lines. The Army's official history summed up these days' costly victories this way, "The battle for central Saipan can be said to have come to a successful end."

### *D+16-D+19, 1-4 July*

Now Holland Smith turned his attention to operation plans to drive through the northern third of Saipan and bring the campaign to a successful, albeit a bloody, conclusion. His next objective line ran from Garapan up the west coast to Tanapag and then eastward across the island. Past Tanapag, near Flo-

res Point, the 2d Marine Division would be pinched out and become the corps reserve. That would leave the 27th Infantry Division and the 4th Marine Division to assault General Saito's final defenses.

The easiest assignment during this period fell to the 4th Marine Division on the east coast. It advanced 3,500 yards against light opposition, veering to its left, ending on 4 July with its left flank some 2,000 yards north of Tanapag, right on the west coast.

As usual, what looked like "light opposition" to General Schmidt in his divisional CP looked very different to that tired, tense lieutenant who described a painfully typical rifle platoon situation on D+16:

I took the rest of my men and we proceeded—very cautiously—to comb the area. It

was a terrible place: the rocks and creepers were so interwoven that they formed an almost impenetrable barrier; visibility was limited to a few feet. After what had happened to [my wounded sergeant], the atmosphere of the place was very tense. We located some rock crevices we thought the Japs might be in, and I tried calling to them in our Japanese combat phrases to come out and surrender. This proved fruitless, and it let the Japs know exactly where we were, while we had no idea of their location. Then I tried to maneuver our flame-thrower man into a position where he could give the crevice a blast without becoming a sitting-duck target him-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 84885

*The only way to deal with some Japanese in their well-protected defenses was to blast them with a flame-thrower.*

self. Because of the configuration of the ground, this proved impossible.

Right about now, there was a shot off to our left. We started over to investigate and all hell broke loose! A Jap automatic weapon opened up right beside us. We all hit the deck automatically. No one was hit (for a change), but we couldn't spot the exact location of the weapon (as usual). I called to the man who'd been over on the left flank. No answer. What had happened to him?

At this point more enemy fire spattered around the small group of Marines. The source seemed to be right on top of them, so the lieutenant told two of his men to throw some grenades over into the area he thought the fire was coming from—about 20

feet away. Under cover of that, the Marines worked a rifleman forward a couple of yards to try to get a bead on the Japanese, but he was unable to spot them and the enemy fire seemed to grow heavier.

Now the lieutenant began to get very worried:

Here we were—completely isolated from the rest of the company—only half a dozen of us left—our flank man had disappeared and now we were getting heavy fire from an uncertain number of Japs who were right in our middle and whom we couldn't locate! Some of the men were getting a little jittery I could see, so I tried to appear as calm and cool as I could (although I didn't feel that way inside!). I decided to move back to the other end of the hilltop and

report to [our company commander] on the phone. If I could get his OK, I would then contact [another one of our platoons] for reinforcements, and we could move back into this area and clean out the Jap pocket.

Pressing hard against the Japanese defenses constantly resulted in these kinds of face-to-face encounters. Three days later (D+19), Lieutenant Colonel Chambers observed a memorable act of bravery:

Three of our tanks came along the road. . . . They made the turn to the south and then took the wrong turn, which took them off the high ground and into a cave area where there were literally hundreds of Japs, who swarmed all over





Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 85221

*He may have started out sitting on a dud 16-inch Navy shell, enjoying a smoke while emptying sand from his "boondockers," but by the end of the campaign, three weeks later, he had had too little sleep, too many fire fights, and too many buddies dead.*

*"Patrol, Saipan."*

By Richard Gibney in Marine Corps Art Collection



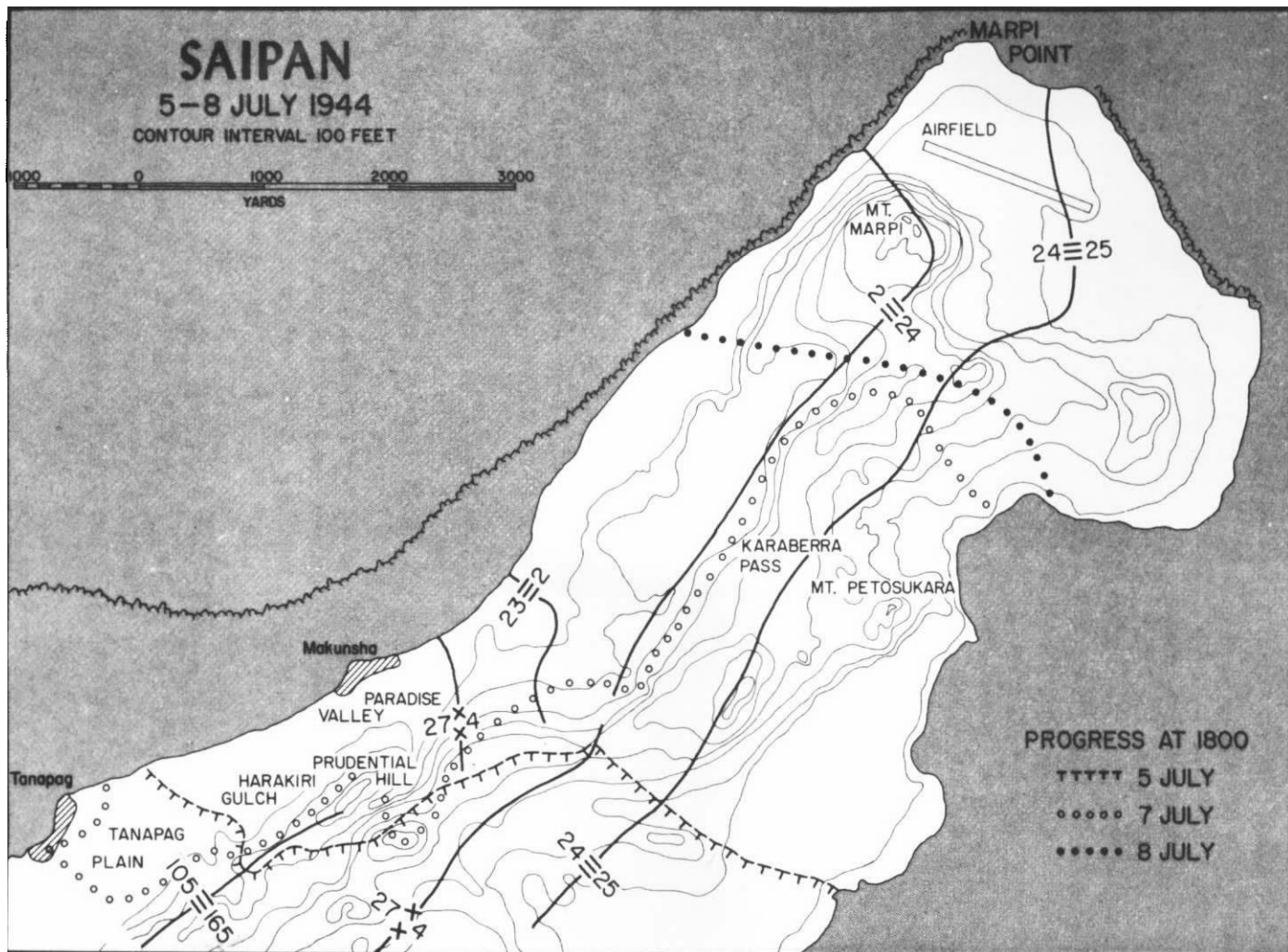
the tanks. We were watching and heard on the radio that (the lieutenant) who commanded the tanks was hollering for help, and I don't blame him. They had formed a triangle and covered each other with the co-axial guns as best as they could.

The commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 25th Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Hollis U. ("Musty") Mustain was nearest the crisis. Chambers went on:

Mustain's executive officer was a regular major by the name of Fenton Mee. Musty and I were together, and when radio operators told us what was going on, Musty turned to Mee and said, "Get some people there and get those tanks out."

Mee turned around to his battalion CP, who were all staff people. He just pointed and said, "Let's get going." He turned and took off. I can still see his face—he figured he was going to get killed. They got there and the Japs pulled out. This let the tanks get out, and they were saved. It was one of the bravest things I ever saw people do.

Chambers also noted that, by D+19, out of 28 officers and 690 enlisted men in his rifle companies at the start of the campaign, he now had only 6 officers and 315 men left in those companies. Counting his headquarters company, he had just 468 men remaining of the battalion's original total strength of 1,050, so one rifle company simply had to be disbanded. The grim toll was re-



peated in another battalion which had had 22 out of 29 officers and 490 enlisted men either killed or wounded in action.

Next to the 4th Marine Division was the 27th Infantry Division in the center of the line of attack. It, too, had a far easier time than in the grinding experiences it had just come through. Its advance also veered left, and was "against negligible resistance" with "the enemy in full flight." Thus it reached the west coast, pinching off the 2d Marine Division and allowing it to go into reserve.

There was a different story in the 2d Marine Division zone of action at the beginning of this period. On 2 July Flametree Hill was seized and the 2d Marines stormed into Garapan, the second largest city in the Mariana Islands. What the regiment found was a shambles; the town had been completely leveled by naval gunfire and Marine artillery.

The official Marine history pictures the scene:

Twisted metal roof tops now littered the area, shielding Japanese snipers. A number of deftly hidden pillboxes were scattered among the ruins. Assault engineers, covered by riflemen, slipped behind such obstacles to set explosives while flamethrowers seared the front. Assisted by the engineers, and supported by tanks and 75mm self-propelled guns of the regimental weapons company, the 2d Marines beat down the scattered resistance before nightfall. On the beaches, suppressing fire from the LVT(A)s of the 2d Armored Amphibian Battalion silenced the Japanese weapons located near the water.

Moving past the town, the 2d Marine Division drove towards Flores Point, halfway to Tanapag. Along the way, with

filthy uniforms, stiff with sweat and dirt after over two weeks of fierce fighting, the Marines joyfully dipped their heads and hands into the cool ocean waters.

With the other two divisions already having veered their attack to the left and reached the northwest coast, the 2d Marine Division was now able to go into corps reserve, as planned, on 4 July. (Holland Smith, seeing the end in sight on Saipan, wanted this division rested for the forthcoming assault on neighboring Tinian Island.)

The Japanese, meanwhile, were falling back to a final defensive line north of Garapan. The American attack of the preceding weeks had not only shattered their manpower, their artillery, and their tanks, but the enemy also was desperate for food. "Many of them had been so pressed for provisions that they were eating field grass and tree bark."

## *D+20-D+23, 5-8 July*

Any Japanese "withdrawal" meant that some of their men were left behind in caves to fight to the death. This tactic produced again and again for the American troops the life-threatening question of whether there were civilians hidden inside who should be saved. There was a typical grim episode at this time for First Lieutenant Frederic A. Stott, in the 1st Battalion, 24th Marines:

On this twenty-first day of the battle we trudged along a circuitous route to relieve the 23d Marines for an attack scheduled for 1300. A normal artillery preparation preceded it, followed by the morale-lifting rockets, but neither they nor mortar fire could eliminate many cave-dwelling Japs. And again the cost was heavy. Using civilian men, women, and children as decoys, the Jap soldiers managed to entice a volunteer patrol forward into the open to collect additional civilian prisoners. A dozen

men from A Company were riddled as the ruse succeeded.

This kind of treacherous action by the Japanese was demonstrated in a different form on the following day (D+21). Lieutenant Colonel Chambers described how he dealt summarily with it—and, by contrast how his men treated genuine civilians who had been hiding:

.... a few of the Japs had played possum by smearing blood of other Japs on themselves and lying still as the Marines came up. However, within the battalion my instructions were "if it didn't stink, stick it." [My officer] just laughed and said the Marines had bayoneted all the bodies. You had to do it!

We also picked up several civilian prisoners, including some women and children. The thing that really got to me was watching these boys of mine; they'd take all kinds of risks; they'd go into a cave never knowing whether there would be soldiers in there, to bring

out these civilians. The minute they got them out, they began to feed them, give them part of their rations, and offer their cigarettes to the men. It made you feel proud of the boys for doing this.

Once the 2d Marine Division became corps reserve, it was obvious to General Smith that the time was ripe for a banzai attack. He duly warned all units to be alert, and paid a personal visit on 6 July to General Griner, of the 27th Infantry Division, to stress the likelihood of an attack coming down the coastline on the flat ground of the Tanapag Plain.

General Saito was now cornered in his sixth (and last) command post, a miserable cave in Paradise Valley north of Tanapag. The valley was constantly raked by American artillery and naval gunfire; he had left only fragmentary remnants of his troops; he was himself sick, hungry, and wounded. After giving orders for one last fanatical banzai charge, he decided to commit hara-kiri in his cave. At 10a.m. on 6 July, fac-

*A salvo from the truck-mounted rockets was a welcome prelude to any Marine attack.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 88403



# Medal of Honor Recipients

**P**rivate First Class Harold Christ Agerholm was born on 29 January 1925, in Racine, Wisconsin. "For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving with the Fourth Battalion, Tenth Marines, Second Marine Division, in action against enemy Japanese forces on Saipan, Marianas Islands, 7 July 1944. When the enemy launched a fierce, determined counterattack against our positions and overran a neighboring artillery battalion, Private First Class Agerholm immediately volunteered to assist in the effort to check the hostile attack and evacuate our wounded. Locating and appropriating an abandoned ambulance jeep, he repeatedly made extremely perilous trips under heavy rifle and mortar fire and single-handedly loaded and evacuated approximately 45 casualties, working tirelessly and with utter disregard for his own safety during a gruelling period of more than 3 hours. Despite intense, persistent enemy fire, he ran out to aid two men whom he believed to be wounded Marines, but was himself mortally wounded by a Japanese sniper while carrying out his hazardous mission. Private First Class Agerholm's brilliant initiative, great personal valor and self-sacrificing efforts in the face of almost certain death reflect the highest credit upon himself and the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country."

*Harold Christ Agerholm*



**P**rivate First Class Harold Glenn Epperson was born on 14 July 1923, in Akron, Ohio. "For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving with the First Battalion, Sixth Marines, Second Marine Division, in action against enemy Japanese forces on the Island of Saipan in the Marianas, on 25 July 1944. With his machine-gun emplacement bearing the full brunt of a fanatic assault initiated by the Japanese under cover of predawn darkness, Private First Class Epperson manned his weapon with determined aggressiveness, fighting furiously in the defense of his battalion's position and maintaining a steady stream of devastating fire against rapidly infiltrating hostile troops to aid . . . in breaking the abortive attack. Suddenly a Japanese soldier, assumed to be dead, sprang up and hurled a powerful hand grenade into the emplacement. Determined to save his comrades, Private First Class Epperson unhesitatingly chose to sacrifice himself and, diving upon the deadly missile, absorbed the shattering violence of the exploding charge in his own body. Stout-hearted and indomitable in the face of certain death, Private First Class Epperson fearlessly yielded his own life that his able comrades might carry on . . . His superb valor and unflinching devotion to duty throughout reflect the highest credit upon himself and upon the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country."

*Harold Glenn Epperson*



**S**ergeant Grant Frederick Timmerman was born on 14 February 1919, in Americus, Kansas. "For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty as Tank Commander serving with the Second Battalion, Sixth Marines, Second Marine Division, during action against enemy Japanese forces on Saipan, Marianas Islands, on 8 July 1944. Advancing with his tank a few yards ahead of the infantry in support of a vigorous attack on hostile positions, Sergeant Timmerman maintained steady fire from his anti-aircraft sky mount machine gun until progress was impeded by a series of enemy trenches and pillboxes. Observing a target of opportunity, he immediately ordered the tank stopped and, mindful of the danger from the muzzle blast as he prepared to open fire with the 75mm, fearlessly stood up in the exposed turret and ordered the infantry to hit the deck. Quick to act as a grenade, hurled by the Japanese, was about to drop into the open turret hatch, Sergeant Timmerman unhesitatingly blocked the opening with his body, holding the grenade against his chest and taking the brunt of the explosion. His exceptional valor and loyalty in saving his men at the cost of his own life reflect the highest credit upon Sergeant Timmerman and the United States Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country."

*Grant Frederick Timmerman*





# Navy Chaplains

Two types of non-combatants are attached to Marine units: members of the Navy Medical Corps and Navy Chaplain Corps. Whenever the Marines are in combat, they are well tended to in body and soul on the front lines. Navy Lieutenant John H. Craven, Chaplain Corps, earned the Bronze Star for his actions under fire on Saipan. Later he summarized activities:

"In combat our main action was to go from place to place, unit to unit, and start out early in the morning and go till dark, just visiting one unit after the other and many times just have a very brief service. We had some very small hymn books . . . and some Testaments I could carry in my map case, and we would just gather a few men together in a bomb crater or defilade . . . and I would have one service after the other. Sometimes we had twelve, thirteen, or fourteen of those in one day, especially on Sunday. . . .

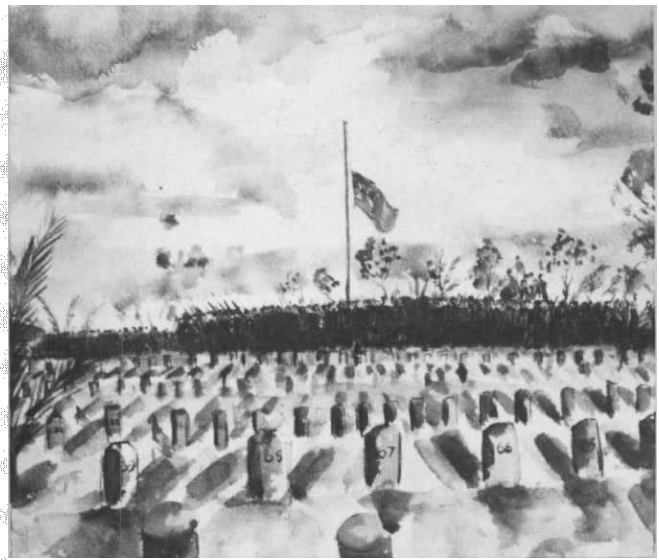
"Then we had to take our turn at the cemetery. Each chaplain from different units would go down and take his turn for burial. We had a brief committal service for each one as they brought the bodies in. And I set myself up to try to keep up with all of the men of our units: where they were, whether they were in the hospital. I worked closely with a sergeant major and it was amazing how we were able to keep up with men, and when they were killed and when and where they were buried."

Craven kept a notebook listing all the casualties, and he would keep that current from day to day. Each evening he would compare notes with the regimental sergeant major. It was a help to any chaplain to know who were casualties and where, and to report and work with their friends, and it was also a help to the sergeant major because it verified reports he got.

When Chaplain Craven and the other chaplains returned to the rear areas with their units, they started writing letters to the families of everyone who was killed in the regiment, and added their letters to those the commanding officers were required to write.

One other regimental chaplain used a special type of ministrations. He had a canvas gas-mask carrier slung over each shoulder. In one carrier he had Scotch whiskey, in the other fried chicken. As he knelt by each young, frightened, wounded Marine, he was invariably asked, "Am I going to be O.K.?" "Sure you are!" was the cheerful answer. "While you are waiting to be evacuated, would you rather have a drumstick or a wing?" The young Marine would be so surprised he would forget about himself. Then, when the chaplain asked if he wanted to wash it down with a swig of Scotch, he couldn't believe he was hearing correctly amidst all the confusion, noise, and death all around him.

A young doctor, hearing about this chaplain, said, "That man probably saved more young lives from dying of shock than will ever be known."



*The Saipan cemetery was dedicated after the battle.*

Watercolor by SSGT John Fabion, Marine Corps Art Collection.

ing east and crying "Tenno Haika! Banzai! [Long live the Emperor! Ten thousand ages!]," he drew his own blood first with his own sword and then his adjutant shot him and Admiral Nagumo in the head with a pistol, but not before he said, "I will meet my staff in Yasakuni Shrine 3 a.m., 7 July!" This was to be the time ordered for the commencement of the final attack.

The ultimate outcome was clear to Saito: "Whether we attack, or whether we stay where we are, there is only death."

The threat of a mad, all-out enemy charge was nothing new to the troops on Saipan. A rifleman recounted one such experience:

Whenever we cornered the enemy and there was no way out, we faced the dreaded banzai attack. The 23d Marines had a few of these during our Saipan adventure, as did all the other outfits. I dreaded these attacks and yet welcomed them, which is quite a paradox. They generated a great deal of fear but, when it was over, that particular sector was Jap-free.

For hours, we could hear them preparing for their banzai attack, as it was the end for them and they knew it. Because it was against their heritage, their training, and their belief, they would not surrender. All that was left was a final charge, a pouring in of all their troops in one concentrated place with their pledge to take as many of us with them as possible.

His account continued with a dramatic description of the tense waiting he endured, while he lis-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 81846

*Navy corpsmen risked their lives daily to treat wounded Marines.*

tened to the enemy "yells and screams going on for hours." The noise increased as Marine artillery and mortars, pounding in the direction of the Japanese sounds, added to the deafening din. The Marines were waiting in their foxholes with clips of ammo placed close at hand so that they could reload fast, fixing their bayonets onto their rifles, ensuring that their knives were loose in their scabbard all in anticipation of the forthcoming attacks. Listening to the screaming, all senses alert, many of the men had prayers on their lips as they waited. Unexpectedly, there was silence, a silence that signaled the enemy's advance. Then:

Suddenly there is what sounded like a thousand people screaming all at once, as a hoard of "mad men" broke out of the darkness before us. Screams of "Banzai" fill the air, Japanese officers leading the "devils from hell," their swords drawn and swishing in circles over their heads. Jap soldiers were following their leaders, firing their weapons at us and screaming "Banzai" as they charged toward us.

Our weapons opened up, our mortars and machine guns fired continually. No longer do they fire in bursts of three or five. Belt after belt of ammuni-

tion goes through that gun, the gunner swinging the barrel left and right. Even though Jap bodies build up in front of us, they still charged us, running over their comrades' fallen bodies. The mortar tubes became so hot from the rapid fire, as did the machine gun barrels, that they could no longer be used.

Although each [attack] had taken its toll, still they came in droves. Haunting memories can still visualize the enemy only a few feet away, bayonet aimed at our body as we empty a clip into him. The momentum carries him into our



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 84474

*The cost of battle. Fellow Marines mourn as a buddy is to be buried.*

foxhole, right on top of us. Then pushing him off, we reload and repeat the procedure.

Bullets whiz around us, screams are deafening, the area reeks with death, and the smell of Japs and gunpowder permeate the air. Full of fear and hate, with the desire to kill. . . [Our enemy seems to us now to be] a savage animal, a beast, a devil, not a human at all, and the only thought is to kill, kill, kill. . . Finally it ends.

This was the wild chaos that General Smith predicted as the final convulsive effort of the Japan-

ese. And it came indeed in the early morning hours of 7 July (D+22), the climactic moment of the battle for Saipan. The theoretical Japanese objective was to smash through Tanapag and Garapan and reach all the way down to Charan-Kanoa. It was a "fearful charge of flesh and fire, savage and primitive. . . Some of the enemy were armed only with rocks or a knife mounted on a pole."

The avalanche hit the 105th Infantry, dug in for the night with two battalions on the main line of resistance and the regimental headquarters behind them. However, those

two forward battalions had left a 500-yard gap between them, which they planned to cover by fire.

The Japanese found this gap, poured through it, and headed pell-mell for the regimental headquarters of the 105th. The men of the frontline battalions fought valiantly but were unable to stop the banzai onslaught.

Three artillery battalions of the 10th Marines behind the 105th were the next target. The gunners could not set their fuses fast enough, even when cut to four-tenths of a second, to stop the enemy right on top of them. So they lowered the muzzles of their 105mm howitzers and



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 84474

*A Marine moves out to catch up with his unit after he has covered a dead comrade with a poncho liner and marked his position with his bayoneted rifle.*

spewed ricochet fire by bouncing their shells off the foreground. Many of the other guns could not fire at all, since Army troops ahead of them were inextricably intertwined with the Japanese attackers. However, other Marines in the artillery battalions fired every type of small weapon they could find. The fire direction center of one of their battalions was almost wiped out, and the battalion commander was killed. The cane field to their front was swarming with enemy troops.

The guns were overrun and the Marine artillerymen, after removing the firing locks of their guns, fell back to continue the fight as infantrymen.

The official history of the 27th Infantry Division recounts sadly the reactions of its fellow regiments when the firestorm broke on the 105th. The men of the nearby 165th Infantry chose that morning to "stand where they were and shoot Japs without any effort to move forward." By 1600 that afternoon, after

finally starting to move to the relief of the shattered 105th, the 165th "was still 200 to 300 yards short" of making contact. This tardiness was unfortunately matched by "the long delay in the arrival of the 106th Infantry" to try to shore up the battered troops of the 105th.

The extraordinarily bitter hand-to-hand fighting finally took the momentum out of the Japanese surge, and it was stopped at last at the CP of the 105th some 800 yards



south of Tanapag. By 1800 most of the ground lost had been regained.

It had been a ghastly day. The 105th Infantry's two battalions had suffered a shocking 918 casualties while killing 2,295 Japanese. One of the Marine artillery battalions had 127 casualties, but had accounted for 322 of the enemy. A final count of the Japanese dead reached the staggering total of 4,311, some due to previous shell-fire, but the vast majority killed in the banzai charge.

Amidst the carnage, there had been countless acts of bravery. Two that were recognized by later awards of the Army Medal of Honor were the leadership and "resistance to the death" of Army Lieutenant Colonel William J. O'Brien, commander of a battalion of the 105th Infantry, and one of his squad leaders, Sergeant Thomas A. Baker.

Three Marines each "gallantly gave his life in the service of his country" and were posthumously awarded the Navy Medal of Honor. They were Private First Class Harold C. Agerholm, Private First Class Harold G. Epperson, and Sergeant Grant F. Timmerman.

The 3d Battalion, 10th Marines, which had fought so tenaciously in the banzai assault, received the Navy Unit Commendation. Four years later, the 105th Infantry and its attached tank battalion were awarded the Army Distinguished Unit Citation.

While attention centered on the bloody battle on the coast, the 23d Marines was attacking a strong Japanese force well protected by caves in a cliff inland. The key to their elimination was an ingenious improvisation. In order to provide fire support, truck-mounted rocket launchers were lowered over the cliff by chains attached to tanks. Once down at the base, their fire, supplemented by that of rocket gunboats off shore, snuffed out the enemy resistance.

The next day, D+23, 8 July, saw the beginning of the end. The Japanese had spent the last of their unit manpower in the banzai charge; now it was time for the final American mop-up. LVTs rescued men of the 105th Infantry who had waded out from the shore to the reef to escape the Japanese. Holland Smith then moved most of the 27th Infantry Division into reserve, and put the 2d Marine Division back on the line of attack, with the 105th Infantry attached. Together with the 4th Marine Division, they swept north towards the end of the island.

Along the coast there were bizarre spectacles that presaged a macabre ending to the campaign. The official Marine history pictured the scene:

The enemy pocketed in the area had destroyed themselves in suicidal rushes from the high cliffs to the rocky beach below. Many were observed, along with hundreds of civilians, wading out into the sea and permitting themselves to be drowned. Others committed hara-kiri with knives, or killed themselves with grenades. Some officers, using their swords, decapitated many of their troops.

### *D+24, 9 July*

It was to be the final day of a long, grueling campaign. The 6th and 8th Marines came down from the hills to the last western beaches, while the 4th Marine Division, with the 2d Marines attached, reached Marpi Point, the northern end of the island.

There a final drama of horror was played out. Lieutenant Colonel Chambers watched, amazed:

During this day as we moved along the cliffs and caves, we uncovered civilians all the time. The Jap soldiers would not surrender, and

would not permit the civilians to surrender. I saw with my own eyes women, some carrying children, come out of the caves and start toward our lines. They'd be shot down by their own people. I watched any number of women carrying children come down to the cliffs that dropped to the ocean.

They were very steep, very precipitous. The women would come down and throw the children into the ocean and jump in and commit suicide. I watched one group at a distance of perhaps 100 yards, about eight or ten civilian men, women and children get into a little huddle and blow themselves up. . . . It was a sad and terrible thing, and yet I presume quite consistent with the Japanese rules of Bushido.

Lieutenant Stott in that same division witnessed other unbelievable forms of self-destruction:

Interpreters were summoned, and they pleaded by amplifier for the civilians to come forward in surrender. No movement followed. . . . The people drew closer together into a compact mass. It was still predominantly civilians, but several in uniform could be distinguished circling about in the throng and using the civilians for protection. As they huddled closer, sounds of a weird singing chant carried up to us. Suddenly a waving flag of the Rising Sun was unfurled. Movement grew more agitated; men started leaping into the sea, and the chanting gave way to startled cries, and with them the popping sound of detonating grenades. It was the handful of soldiers, determined to prevent the surrender or escape of their kinfolk, who

tossed grenades into the milling throng of men, women, and children, and then dived into the sea from which escape was impossible. The exploding grenades cut the mob into patches of dead, dying, and wounded, and for the first time we actually saw water that ran red with human blood.

With this kind of fanaticism characterizing the Japanese, it is not surprising that 23,811 of the enemy were known dead, with uncounted thousands of others charred by flamethrowers and sealed forever in their caves. Only 736 prisoners of war were taken, and of these 438 were Koreans. American casualties numbered 3,225 killed in action, 13,061 wounded in action, and 326 missing in action.

The island was officially declared "secured" at 1615 on 9 July (although "mopping up" continued afterwards). The 4th Marine Division was later awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for its "outstanding performance in combat" on Saipan and its subsequent assault on the neighboring island of Tinian.

### *Saipan's Legacy*

The campaign on Saipan had brought many American casualties, and it also heralded the kind of fighting which would be experienced in subsequent operations in the Central and Western Pacific in the days that lay ahead in the Pacific War. Holland Smith declared it "the decisive battle of the Pacific offensive" for it "opened the way to the home islands." Japanese General Saito had written that "the fate of the Empire will be decided in this one action." A Japanese admiral agreed, "Our war was lost with the loss of Saipan." It had truly been a "strategic strike" for the United States.

The proof of these fundamental judgements was dramatized four months later, when 100 B-29 bombers took off from Saipan bound for Tokyo.

There were other fateful results. The United States now had a secure advanced naval base for further punishing strikes close to enemy shores. Emperor Hirohito was now forced to consider a diplomatic settlement of the war. The militaristic General Tojo, the Premier, and his entire cabinet fell from power on 18 July, nine days after Saipan's loss.

The lessons learned in this campaign would be observed in future American operations, as flaws were analyzed and corrected. The clear need to improve aviation support for the ground troops led directly to the better results in the Philippine Islands and on Iwo Jima and Okinawa. The artillery-spotting missions flown by VMO-2 and -4, set a pattern for the use of the light planes in the future.

Naval gunfire support was also closely reviewed. General Saito had written, "If there just were no naval gunfire, we feel we could fight it out with the enemy in a decisive battle." While more than 8,500 tons of ammunition were fired by U.S. Navy ships, the flat trajectory of the naval guns "proved somewhat limiting," as the shells didn't have the plunging and penetrating effect which was needed against Japanese strongholds.

Finally, there were lessons learned from the supply confusion that had marred the early days on the beaches and hadn't improved much since the days of the Guadalcanal landing. Logistic problems had arisen because, once a beach was in friendly hands, the ships were unloaded as rapidly as possible and the sailors in the landing craft were in a hurry to get into the beaches and back out again. Supplies were spread all over the beach, partly because of the enemy's artillery and mortar ha-

assing fire on the beaches, but also because of the corps' hard-driving, rapid attack, the estimate of resupply requirements was far too small. For example, a shortage of radio batteries was never corrected. There was insufficient time to sort and separate equipment and supplies adequately. Consequently, there were mix-ups, with Marine uniforms getting into Army dumps and Army supplies showing up in Marine dumps.

It was after the beach confusion at Saipan that the Navy decided a permanent corps shore party should be organized. It would be solely responsible for the movement of all supplies from the beach to the dumps and for the subsequent issue to the divisions.

Tactical lessons learned were also new to the Central Pacific war. Instead of a small atoll, the battle had been one of movement on a sizable land mass, and it was further complicated by the numerous caves and the defensive systems they provided for the Japanese. The enemy had defended caves before, but never on such a large scale. On Saipan, these caves were both natural and man-made. Often natural vegetation gave them excellent camouflage. Some had steel doors which could be opened for an artillery piece or machine gun to fire, and then retreat behind the door before return fire could take effect. The flame-throwing tanks could reach many of these caves and so proved very useful. Unfortunately, their range was limited on Saipan, but this was later improved.

Thus it was that the hard experiences on Saipan led to a variety of changes which paid valuable dividends in saving American lives in the future Pacific campaigns. And the loss of the island was a strategic strike from which the Japanese never recovered, as the United States drove forward to ultimate victory.

## Sources

There are five principal official sources for the facts about the unit actions on Saipan. These range from preliminary, condensed accounts to massive, detailed final studies which reach down to the level of company operations. In the interests of brevity, the author of this monograph has limited himself to covering the actions of regiments and divisions, with minor special exceptions.

The five sources are:

1) Henry I. Shaw, Jr., Bernard C. Nalty, and Edwin T. Turnbladh, *Central Pacific Drive*, vol. 3, *History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II* (Washington: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1966).

2) Philip A. Crowl, *Campaign in the Marianas*, vol 9., *United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1960).

3) Maj Carl W. Hoffman, USMC *Saipan: The Beginning of the End* (Washington: Historical Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1950).

4) Capt James R. Stockman, USMC, *Campaign for the Marianas* (Washington: Historical Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1946).

5) Capt Edmund G. Love, USA, *The 27th Infantry Division in World War II* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1949).

In addition, there is a wide variety of other literature on the Saipan operation. This material ranges from a 19-page essay by a Naval Academy midshipman, to first-hand accounts appearing in the *Marine Corps Gazette*, to wildly subjective books dealing with individual experiences or the "Smith vs Smith" controversy.

To supplement the framework of unit tactics, vignettes of individuals have been drawn from two principal sources:

1) The Personal Papers Collection of the Marine Corps Historical Center has useful memoirs, particularly those of Frederick A. Stott (473-4A32), John C. Chapin (671-4A44), and Robert F. Graf (1946-6B12).

2) In the Center's Oral History Collection, the author examined well over a dozen reminiscences and found only four that involved front-line experiences: Lieutenant Colonel Justice M. Chambers, USMCR (C2); Captain Carl W. Hoffman, USMC, (H2); Lieutenant Colonel William K. Jones, USMC, (J2); and Lieutenant John H. Craven, ChC, USN, (C3).



## About the Author

Captain John C. Chapin earned a bachelor of arts degree with honors in history from Yale University in 1942 and was commissioned later that year. He served as a rifle platoon leader in the 24th Marines, 4th Marine Division, and was wounded in action during the assault landings on Roi-Namur and Saipan.

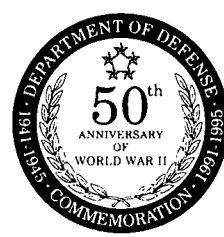
Transferred to duty at the Historical Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, he wrote the first official histories of the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions. Moving to reserve status at the end of World War II, he earned a master's degree in history at George Washington University with a thesis on "The Marine Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1922."

Now a captain in retired status, he has devoted major portions of 10 years to writing history as a volunteer at the Marine Corps Historical Center. His first publication there was an official monograph, *A History of VMFA-115*, for one of the Marine Corps' better-known squadrons. With support from the Historical Center and the Marine Corps Historical Foundation, he then spent some years researching and interviewing for the writing of a new book, *Uncommon Men - The Sergeants Major of the Marine Corps*. This was published by the White Mane Publishing Co.

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